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A NARROW ESCAPE.

Reprinted from "All the Year Round."

BY ANNIE THOMAS,

(MRS. PENDER CUDLIP)

AUTHOR OF "DENIS DONNE," "NO ALTERNATIVE,"
ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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DEDICATED
TO
EDMUND YATES.

MY DEAR EDMUND,

Whatever of ephemeral popularity or odium I may gain by my efforts to make a place for myself in fiction is certainly due to the influence a lecture delivered by you had upon me many years ago. That lecture was entitled "Good Authors at a Discount," and your treatment of the subject implanted the idea in my mind, that there was something glorious even in a non-successful literary career. Experience has considerably modified that idea. Nevertheless, I still so infinitely prefer the incessant toil of a literary life to the monotony of idleness, that I feel impelled to make a public acknowledgment of the service you most unintentionally rendered me long before I knew you, and long before I had the courage or the opportunity to put myself forward as a public nuisance.

For this reason, and because of the friendship of many years which has existed between us, in the course of which I have always found you a frank censor, and a generous critic, I dedicate this—which I believe to be my least undeserving work—to you.

Believe me to be

Yours always faithfully,

ANNIE CUDLIP.

SLOCUM

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A NARROW ESCAPE.



PROLOGUE.

THE “IRREPRESSIBLE.”

THERE is a magnificent mingling of the elements in the scene. The wide stretch of well-wooded, hill-and-valley diversified country, which stretches away beyond the cricket ground, is as fair a portion of our Mother Earth as any that can be found in England. Plenty of air comes into the shrub-bedecked ball-room, through the rose and clematis-covered chinks in the rough woodwork of the walls. There is fire enough in the hearts of those gallant-looking naval men who have run up from Plymouth for the Torquay Cricket Dance, to ignite any

number of matches, and water is pouring down in a persistent flood from the skies that are wetter in Devonshire than in any other part of the country.

Under the shade of the wide verandah many a fair young form leans against the ivy-wreathed pillars which support the rustic edifice, listening, in the lassitude which is the offspring of flattery and vanity, to the fluent talk of the versatile sailors. H.M.S. *Irrepressible* has only been in port in Plymouth for a week, and already her officers have distinguished themselves by their dauntless conduct in the ball-room and the otter-hunting field. Their prowess after Trelawney's hounds still remains to be tested.

The *Irrepressible* has been on foreign service for three years, and these men have three years' bottled-up spirits to get rid of. "It's all very well for those fellows who have been doing the *dolce far niente* in the Mediterranean," they say, "but we have been cut off from everything

lively excepting fever on the West Coast of Africa—we have a good deal of time to make up."

To do them justice they redeem the time to the best of their several abilities, by shooting folly flying, and gathering their roses while they may; pursuing the soft-eyed otter along the banks of the winding Erme and Yealm, and generally taking all that Plymouth and the country round about offers them in the way of instruction and amusement.

Naturally, they, being of the exhaustive order, come to the end of Plymouth and its neighbourhood very shortly, and cast out their lines towards the adjacent towns. So behold them now at Torquay, radiant in their uniforms, with the rich tan of service upon their faces, and the effervescent spirit of a regular break-loose from dull routine hovering over them.

The marked man in the room this night is the Flag Captain of the Port Admiral's ship. He has come up with the "Irrepres-

sibles" partly out of his Irish good-nature, partly of curiosity to see what sort of aim the "Irrepressibles" will take, and what they will bring down—and partly for another reason.

He is the marked man in the room this night, by right of several attributes which women (the arbiters) deem almost divine. He is as gallant, daring, skilful, and noted a rider in the field as has ever followed the famed South Devon hounds. He is as handsome as anything that is not the creation of a Greek sculptor can be, and he has the winning tongue and grace, the mixture of effrontery and chivalry, which only belong to the sons of Erin.

He is standing now, just outside the glare of the lamps which are trained about and softened with wreaths of ivy, talking to a girl who is even more in the shade than himself, for she has passed the barrier and stands out on the balcony. But though no fierce light beats upon her she is very clearly revealed to many people, for she is

no power but only a casual visitor in this place. The girl is a beauty, and she has no friends here; she rides well and boldly, and her father is a reserved invalid who keeps people at bay.

"You tell me how you spend your mornings," the man says. "You go down to the baths with your father and wait while he boils himself first and chills himself down to the proper degree afterwards; but what do you do with your afternoons? and, by Jove, they must be long here!"

"You unconscious lotus-eater," the girl laughs out; "you've come into a land in which it seemeth always afternoon, and you're tripping over Tennyson without knowing it. Well, to answer your question, I ride after luncheon. I've a dear mare, and I ride—oh! everywhere."

"Do you ever ride to Newton Abbott?" the man asks.

"I should think so. Guinevere and I take Newton as our preliminary canter, and then we go on to Ashburton or on the

moor, or anywhere; I don't care much where it is, if the roads don't knock her legs to pieces."

"What a jolly picture you must make on Guinevere," he says enthusiastically: and all his Irish love of fair women and fine horses wakes up.

The idea of making a picture in conjunction with her pet horse has never presented itself to the girl before, but still she does not dislike it in the flash in which she sees it. When he ceases speaking she says—

"I wish you could see her. She looks like 'going' all over; she jumps like a cat, has the reputation of having kicked a town down after she was bought off the race-course where they over-ran her, you know; and I am the only woman who has ever been on her back. I shouldn't like to see another there."

He laughs lightly to himself as he looks down at the girl's bright, eager, uplifted face.

"Jealous as fire about her mare," he thinks, and "wonders how will the fellow manage her with whom she falls in love."

The solution of this problem absorbs the naval Adonis for some time, and by the time he has arrived at a satisfactory conclusion, he has looked at the girl so long and so lovingly that she feels justified to herself for the soft glances she cannot help giving him in return. For the two previous nights have been nights of alternate surrender and struggle on her part. This is the third ball into which Torquay has launched within this week, and she has been at the other two, and this man has been her partner far too often for her peace of mind. She has been compelled to listen to any number of suggestions from her father about the impropriety of her course, and she has been looked askance at on the strand by daylight, as a punishment for her triumphs in the ball-room at night. But to-night she feels justified in believing that she is not throwing her heart away

without sufficient cause. She does not know that in every port he touches, he presses other hands quite as tenderly as now he is pressing hers. She does not know that he has a volley of speeches ready to let off on every occasion, and that he does not specially care what the occasion be, nor who his listener may be, provided only that she be fair. He is here for the present, and it is his habit to make the best of the present, invariably. Dull care would beset him just now were it not for this girl, but she appears to be specially interposed in order to drive dull care away; for she has youth, beauty, talents, and that undefinable something which is expressed in the slang phrase "good form," which if a woman lacks she had better never have been born, than appear in a ball-room wherein the two services are largely represented.

In a superficial, careless kind of way he has been lamenting to her that the intercourse of the last few days will be broken

to-morrow, and now the girl's voice responds in tones of unfeigned regret—

"Why should it be? You'll surely be coming up from Plymouth to the dramatic entertainment at the Bath Saloon, on Saturday. Plymouth is no distance, and if there's nothing better going on there, take the goods the gods give you up here."

"I do generally take the goods the gods give," he rejoins with a laugh. "I don't think you can accuse me of neglecting opportunity, but I go on leave to-morrow, and so I am afraid I shall not make Guinevere's acquaintance."

"Long leave?"

"Six weeks."

The girl's heart drops suddenly. In a fortnight she and her father are to leave Torquay. "And the brightest part of my life will be left behind me," she thinks despondently. She leans her head back against the rustic pillar, looks up in his face, and says in utter sincerity—

"I am sorry."

"So am I, but I must take leave when I can get it, you see; yes, I go up to town to-morrow, and after staying there a week I shall run over to Paris to see some friends there."

She hears his plan with a paling face and a fainting spirit. In her utter despondency she cannot rouse herself to say anything, so he goes on, with a queer little laugh—

"I assure you I would rather stay in Torquay with you than be in Paris with the people I'm going to, though one is a very pretty woman too," he adds, looking straight into the girl's face. Then, as her eyes dilate with unmistakable jealousy, he adds, "Or at least I thought so once, but she has no charm for me now."

"This night is nearly over," she says, with a quick deep sigh. "Oh dear! how short everything pleasant is."

"Why shouldn't you ride over to Newton and see the last of me?" he asks, drawing her out on the balcony; "let me have at least one pleasant memory con-

nected with that howling wilderness of a station, at which you have to wait forty minutes wherever you're going, and whatever the hour of the day may be."

"I could do that," she says slowly; "then you would see Guinevere; what is your train?"

"We reach Newton at four; I shall expect you; don't let the morning's lassitude upset your good resolution; now we will have another turn in the room, or the rumour will arise that we have eloped."

She flushes scarlet at the idea, but she does not resent his utterance of it. On the contrary, she clings rather more closely than before to his arm as they go back into the room, and he swings her away to a swimming waltz tune. By the time the waltz is over, she has promised to ride in to Newton, and show him Guinevere, and see the last of him to-morrow; and every other girl in the room, who has been vainly seeking to engage his attention

during these three bewildering days, is scandalized at the intimacy which is apparent between the two.

At this stage of her career she is as unsuspicious as a child, as fresh as a wild rose, as fearless as a lioness, and as free as the wind. She knows neither doubt nor distrust. She has never in all her life stooped to the smallest concealment. Her likes and dislikes, her pleasures and her pains are patent to all those about her. When she goes home this night, it is her natural and full intention to tell her father of the arrangement she has made for the disposition of to-morrow afternoon. But her father wants to go to bed immediately; he is an invalid and may not be disturbed. When she wakes up late the following morning she finds a note from him telling her he has joined an excursion to Berry Head, and will not be back until the seven o'clock dinner. "All right, I shall be back before him in time to take off my habit and be comfortable," she thinks, and gives no

further thought to anything but the joyous fact that she will see this man once again, and that within a few hours. She will not look beyond this last interview, or, if she does, it is to hope that he will tell her that it shall not be the last.

She passes the early part of the day in the way sojourners in the fair queen of the west do generally pass their time. She bathes, she shops in the Strand, she listens to the Italian band at twelve o'clock, and eats a great many tarts and cakes at Mrs. Rolf's, for, by reason of her father being away, the necessity for taking a proper luncheon at their lodgings is removed from her. At three Guinevere is brought to the door, and Guinevere's mistress is swung up to the saddle by a clever groom, and starts upon her enterprise without fear, and without the smallest particle of self-reproach.

The gallant little chestnut bends to the light hand, and makes a sober, steady progress along the Strand and Union Street; but as she crosses the Upton-Hill Road, the

rider's impatience enters into the spirit of the horse, and the pair that look like one, so perfectly are their movements in unison, go along at a stretching gallop that soon leaves Torquay behind them. Along, with the mare thoroughly in hand, though the pace is faster than it ought to be on this road, until they reach Kingskerswell, and in passing under the ivy-grown arch, the reverberation of Guinevere's hoofs frighten her into a regular run-away gallop that carries her rider into Newton palpitating and breathless.

"So hot, poor dear, I dare not leave you here," she says, addressing her mare, as she springs to the ground in the station yard, and she meditates for a minute as to how she can dispose of Guinevere while she goes on to the platform. Finally she resolves that "the mare must go down to the Globe," and "I'll come down after her in half-an-hour," she says to the hanger-about for incidental jobs who has taken charge of Guinevere.

She is nearly half an hour too early for her appointment, but she is too frank and fearless to feel that there is anything humiliating in this evidence of her haste to meet him. If she had not been desirous of seeing him, of hearing his voice once more, she would not have agreed to come. Having agreed to come, anything like reticence or reserve in the matter is over, as far as she is concerned.

The train is tolerably punctual for a west-country train. As it groans and pants and stops, a first-class carriage door opens, and he jumps out. She goes forward to meet him, with unrestrained delight expressed in every look, every movement. "A pity such a nature should be tamed by suffering," one of the passengers from Plymouth thinks, as he looks at the pair ; then his eyes rest on the girl's companion :

"He's carrying on to the last and no mistake," this other passenger thinks. "I hoped he'd made an end of it last night, for the girl's sake."

He leans far out of the window as he thinks this, but neither one of the pair sees him, for they are engaged in one of these earnest conversations which absorb the faculties of sight, and hearing, and observation, and concentrates these upon themselves. Presently the man in the carriage has to withdraw his head to make room for an incomer. When he puts it out again, the pair have vanished.

“I thought he really meant Paris at last,” the young man says to himself; “but I suppose he’s off to Torquay with her instead; some one really ought to give that girl the straight tip.”

Meanwhile this is how it has been faring with Guinevere’s beautiful mistress.

“Took her from Torquay to the station yard in thirty minutes, did you!” her friend says to her reproachfully; “there’s not one woman in a thousand who deserves a good horse; you always rattle them to pieces.”

“I’m the most careful rider in the world,”

the girl laughs ; "but to-day the little mare lost her head, and—I didn't feel inclined to find it for her. She's being well looked after. I shall ride home sedately enough in the cool of the evening."

"If you're going to wait for the cool of the evening you may just as well come on to Dawlish with me," he says, "take the next train back, and do two good deeds with one stroke—lighten my journey and let your mare rest."

She hesitates, and—is lost, of course. "I may as well do it," she says, questioningly, for she is hungering for a few more minutes with him. So when the train goes on, she goes on with it.

By-and-by their whispered colloquy is interrupted by the swish of the waves at Dawlish. She begins to nerve herself for the parting, but—it is an express train, and Dawlish is behind them in a flash.

Who but the woman to whom they are addressed can ever rightly word the arguments that a man uses when he persuades

her to be rash, and to risk a certain amount of censure from the world, for the uncertain gift of his love and constancy? It is possible enough to imagine them, but after all, it is just as well not to word the imaginings. It is sufficient for the purposes of my story to say that during the hours of her utterly unpremeditated flight, the girl is convinced by him that it will be for her own happiness, as well as for his, to go on with him to town—to be married to him the next day—and to return in a state of penitential bliss to Torquay, immediately afterwards, to crave her papa's forgiveness for causing him so much anxiety as he must needs endure during her absence.

But the scheme breaks down at Paddington, when the fellow-passenger (an *Irrepressible* man) comes to them and says to the girl's lover—

“You're on your way to Paris to your wife, are you not? Remember me kindly to her; I am——”

His speech is interrupted by a subdued

cry of such agony and rage as only an outraged, jealous woman can utter. But, kind-hearted fellow as he is, he is not sorry for his work on this occasion, for the girl goes back to Torquay by the next train, saved.

The man who was taking her away goes on his way—anything but rejoicing—after an assurance of fully repaying him at some future time, to the one who had interrupted the pretty pastime of the present.

CHAPTER I.

THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE.

“WOMEN—especially if they’re love-sick to the idiotic degree that Miss Constable is, will forgive almost anything; but you’re trying her hard, Frank; even I, prejudiced as I am in your favour, must admit that.”

The speaker is a good-looking girl of two or three and twenty, richly endowed by nature with the gift of seeming to be whatever is most fascinating to the person whom it is her current desire to please. Richly endowed too by nature with a beautiful figure, and a face capable of expressing any emotion which she may be desirous of portraying: it expresses light, half-amused contempt now; nothing more. But in reality she is keenly anxious as to

what will be the effect of her apparent burst of frankness on her cousin—the man by her side.

“May is a dear little thing,” he says, slowly, “but it does become a bore when a fellow has to go to the same house night after night, and hear the same things said, and ——”

“See exactly the same expression on the face of your beloved,” the girl interrupts quickly. “Yes, that will be trying enough to you, you fickle fellow, when you’re married, and must endure it; but then the mere fact of your being compelled to endure it will enable you to do it.”

“We won’t begin to talk about my marriage yet,” he answers, with a slight air of confusion; and, as he speaks, he releases his cousin Kate’s hand, which he has been holding during the brief colloquy. He feels that there is something like incongruity between this attitude towards Kate, and the mention of his marriage with another girl.

The young lady feels it too. For all the cousinship between them, for all her greed of admiration, for all her daring disregard of the absent May's claim upon Frank as a rule, Kate is ashamed of herself now.

"I suppose I forgot that you're only my cousin, not my brother; forgive me, Frank, for mentioning the matter in that way."

In an instant she is sisterly in a sweet insincere way, that is a good bit of acting, and appeals powerfully to Frank Forest's love of anything dramatic.

"You may mention any matter, in any way that seems good to you, Kate," he says, warmly, when his sisters come into the room; and Kate saunters to meet them, with as unembarrassed an air as if she had been engrossed with the newspaper she holds in her hand, instead of with another woman's lover.

"Mamma is not coming down to breakfast," one of the girls announces, and the other one asks—

"What do they say of 'Duplicity,' Frank?"

"They say, at least the *Scourge* says, that Frank is quite the coming dramatist," Kate replies for him; "don't you both feel very proud of him? I do."

She does unmistakably, as she turns her lustrous grey hazel eyes full on his, and smiles the flashing happy smile that a girl can smile upon the man she loves, or upon the man she wishes to make believe she loves.

"He's not at all bad, as brothers go," Gertrude, the elder sister says; "but if the *Scourge* takes to over-rating him as much as you do, Kate, he will lose his head, and become a bore to his sisters, who can't be expected to pour out paragraphs of adulation, whenever his lines happen to be so well given that he is accredited with having written them well."

"However, we will go again to-night, and mark May's ecstasies," Marian, the younger sister, adds patronizingly. "Poor May! if she is always going to be panic-stricken, whenever you bring out a play,

Frank, what good will her life be to her?"

The two Miss Forests are good-looking girls, but they pale before the brighter light of their far more attractive cousin, Kate Mervyn.

Buckles fasten nothing on their shoulders, and weapons of war are thrust through their hair and their sashes in the most approved fashion. Chains of steel suspend all manner of useless articles from their respective waists. They are girt about with ferociously appointed belts of Russian leather, and sounding brass. Wherever custom decrees that they may be puffed, they are puffed to the best of the ability of rich silks and buckram. They have about them the swing of a life of perpetual small excitements, and they tread the social wheel with the grace of those who feel they decorate their portion of it. Nevertheless, with all these natural and acquired attributes of theirs, Kate puts them out effectually.

Kate, who in her dress affects the matchless lines of the riding-habit, who banishes laces that tie nothing, and buckles that buckle nothing, and straps that sustain nothing, from every portion of her toilette, leads the eye off her dashing cousins at once. Even they cannot help feeling a goodly portion of what they had come to believe to be necessary, superfluous, when she, in that studied simplicity of hers, comes between them and throws out their grotesque outlines. They watch her now, as she walks about the room, the while she reads aloud selected passages of praise of the comedy which was produced last night.

When Miss Mervyn has exhausted the published panegyrics on the piece, she sits down to breakfast and utters a few original ones, until she is interrupted by Gertrude, who has heard quite enough to satisfy her sisterly heart of her brother's play.

"Are you going to the Constables to luncheon with us, Frank?"

“I am going up to the theatre.”

“Oh dear! then it will fall to our unhappy fate to have to tell May what she calls ‘all about it;’ Kate! yours shall be the pleasing task of assuaging her maidenly fears as to her lover’s success.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk such nonsense,” Frank breaks in angrily; “you’re only making Kate think May a greater fool than she thinks her already; you have the knack, Gertrude, of making everybody absurd by the way you speak of them.”

“Don’t be cross because I imply that May has more of the softness of the dove than the wisdom of the serpent,” his sister laughs carelessly; and Kate, who is always on the watch to see the slightest change in the position of that weathercock, man’s fancy, puts in—

“Softness is far preferable to wisdom in a wife, I should imagine; fancy breakfasting and dining and going through the daily round with a wise woman. I must go up to Aunt Marian now, and read these notices

to her," she says, collecting the papers. Then, as she is about leaving the room, she turns and fires a parting shot:—

"When I think of what Aunt Marian will feel, I can't help feeling that I wish I were your mother, Frank."

She is five or six years younger than her cousin Frank, therefore the expression of the wish is not calculated to raise distressing suspicions of her age in his mind. Man as he is, successful dramatist as he is, he is by no means unwilling to accept these private tributes of sugared laurel leaves from the hands of his cousin Kate. Accordingly he is quick to resent the half-mocking tone and laugh with which his eldest sister says—

"I should think Kate has had some practice in the art of praising men, shouldn't you, Marian? I wonder if she would play the part of consoler equally well if you had failed, Frank!"

"She would play it better than you would," he retorts quickly, "for she is

capable of appreciating what's good in itself, whether it fails or not. What makes you go to the Constables to-day?"

"Their fond desire to heap honours on the head of this fresh member of the family. Mrs. Constable and May are both ready to adore Kate, and you know when Mrs. Constable is ready to adore man, woman, or child, she always offers him, her, or it something to eat; and May is always delighted to get a new legitimate listener to her praises of you."

"Don't chaff any more about May," he says, rising up and walking to the window; "and don't trot her out for Kate's amusement," he adds abruptly, as his conscience pricks him at the thought of the desolation which will pervade May's spirit when she finds that he is not of the party. "Tell May how busy I am, haven't a moment to myself, and all that sort of thing, will you?"

"Yes, of course I will; and look here, Frank, I won't say a word about the neat

and obliging way in which Kate has copied out those parts for you, and those delightful long strolls in Kensington Gardens in the afternoons. I'll be as discreet as—as Kate herself."

"Do you mean to go with the Constables to-night, Frank, or with us?" the other sister asks; and he mutters something about "hardly knowing, but thinking it better that the Constables should act independently, as something unforeseen might of course arise to detain him."

"Of course we can't all pack into one box; there will be Kate and you and me in our box; do let the Constables be somewhere else, Frank."

"Oh, Marian, Frank must be with May," Gertrude says. She is not going herself, and is indifferent to the prospect of other people being slightly crushed. With this the three separate—the girls to put on their habits for the morning ride; the brother to go up to the theatre to do away with two or three little crumples in the new piece.

His sisters start off presently, and still he loiters about in the library, whistling softly, and being restless and uncertain altogether. Before he can make up his mind to quit the house Kate comes in with a look that is new to him on her expressive face.

“Is there anything the matter? what is it?” he asks, going to meet her with outstretched hands, and she puts hers into his confidingly, and answers—

“Frank, Aunt Marian, out of the dearest kindness to me, has made me so unhappy.”

“That’s the form women’s kindness very often takes, but my mother is different to most women; what has vexed you, Kate?”

He lifts one hand up as he speaks and is going to kiss it, but Kate stops him.

“No, don’t do it; it’s just *that* that is the matter. I ought not to tell you, but I’ve no one else to turn to, and I must tell you. Frank, she has accused me of being forgetful of May, and May’s claims upon you.”

“I wish my mother would let my affairs

alone," he says in a tone of vexation ; "forgetful of May ! Why should you not be forgetful of May ? What claim has she upon your recollection ? If I forget her now——"

He pauses and his hearer's face falls, and she says gently—

"If you forget her ! You can't do it, Frank."

"I should be a scoundrel if I did," he replies quickly ; "but what does my mother mean ? why has she been worrying you ?"

"She means that I have shown too much interest in you, Frank," she says, with an effort that sends the blood from her heart to her brow ; and her voice fails her, and she stands before him with bent head and trembling hands, for she is not acting now.

The flattery is very potent, but he does struggle hard with inclination and temptation. He recalls all May's innocent trustfulness, he tries to think of her pure, deep love. But all the while he is longing to break through all bonds, and to draw this

girl to him with kisses warmer than any he has ever given May Constable.

“I wish she had not opened the question,” he says angrily; “at any rate we will put it to rest; it shall not disturb you if I can help it. If you are to be spoken about and misunderstood because of your kindness to me, why I should be a selfish fellow if I tried to get you to show it; I will not be selfish in my pursuit of you, Kate; forgive me for what is past, and accept my promise there shall be no more of it.”

She looks up at him amazed, heartsore, and stricken. She had not anticipated that he would take her disclosure thus. Then he, overpowered by the look which is so full of the interest which she has been accused of feeling, and by way, also, of rewarding himself for the excellent resolutions he has just made, lowers his head at last, and lets his lips rest on her forehead.

“We are cousins, you know,” he mutters, excusingly; and Kate answers—

“Surely in that fact there is to be found sufficient reason why you shouldn’t shun me for the future, Frank? May has your confidence, your vows, your promise, and she will have your name; let me have your friendship.”

She will not say, “May has your love;” and he notices the omission, and is partly pleased and partly pained by it. He is, at the same time, glad and sorry that the flirtation of the last three weeks should have developed into a deeper feeling on her side; and he is a little annoyed that the cool quality of his regard for May should be so transparent to his cousin. Still, he allows himself to be hurried on by his ardent nature to say, in response to her request—

“You’ll always have my warmest friendship, Kate, however little I may be able to show it; and as for the rest—if I had only been free!”

“If I had been a man, would I have let my fetters stand in my way?” she thinks,

in contemptuous anger. Then the bitter sensation assails her that, after all, she may be in the position of the biter bit. In this case, though she began in sport, she has developed into earnestness; and Frank can calmly speak about what he would have done, "if" he had been free! Worse than all, the conviction smites her that she has let him perceive that he has gained an easy victory over her, and that, therefore, she will be at the disadvantage which invariably attends the one who loves most. Happily for them both, these humiliating considerations conspire to make her release her hands from his, and move away from him. She is in the act of doing this, she is only just in safety, when a round-eyed, fair-haired, gentle-faced girl comes in with the air of one who is quite at home, and has a right of possession.

"I have come to tell you that I won't have you waste any more time about those tiresome plays, Frank," May Constable begins, in her effusive, soft way. "I met

the girls, and they told me you were going up to the theatre; and, I believe, instead of that, you have been at home, writing. Now, hasn't he, Miss Mervyn? and isn't it a shame that he should work so hard, and never give himself one pleasure?"

She is by his side as she speaks her loving platitudes, clinging to his arm, and conducting herself as a girl may conduct herself who is openly and honestly engaged in the eyes of all the world. Frank is crimsoning with shame; not at his half-falseness to May, but that Kate should be compelled to witness what strikes him at this particular moment as May's foolish fondness. As for Kate, she is gnawed by the pangs of jealous wrath, and, novel as are the sensations, and great as is the charm novelty has for erring humanity, she does not like them.

"You are quite right," she says, in the clear, distinct tones, which offer such a marked contrast to May's lisping, slightly-affected pronunciation. "You are quite right, Miss Constable. Frank has been

doing very hard and very unpleasant work this morning; if I were in your place, I should see that he was more careful of himself in future."

"Oh Frank!" May ejaculates, her inconsequent mind in a state of chaos as Kate's words conjure up all sorts of possibilities and impossibilities; "you hear your cousin calls it hard, unpleasant work! Why will you go on? I know so much writing is bad for the health; I get a headache if I only write a letter. It's thinking so much, I suppose; one has to think so much when one's writing a letter. I do wish you would be satisfied with your office work: and you don't want the money."

"You are ambitious for him, indeed," Kate says, with cool-satire that glances off May's intelligence, as shot does off an iron-clad. Frank says, hurriedly, "Don't be foolish, May," and gets himself away at last, leaving the serpent and the dove alone together.

CHAPTER II.

THE "DEAR LITTLE THING" AT HOME.

MAY CONSTABLE is a friendship-at-any-price girl. She has always a bosom friend on hand, about whom she entwines herself, and in whose ear she reposes perfectly innocent and uninteresting confidences. Frank's sisters have not exactly repulsed, but they have certainly never invited these ebullitions of feeling, consequently May thinks them hard. Having imprudently dropped a well-beloved school-fellow who had been as the oak to the ivy to her, previous to her engagement to Frank Forest, she has been on the *qui vive* for the last few months to discover some trusty piece of lattice work about which she may twine her tendrils. It says much for her subtle and delicate insight into character and motives

that she should have already mentally appointed Kate to the office of her feminine guide, philosopher, and friend.

Aggrieved as Kate is, disappointed in her own strength, outraged by a full sense of her own weakness, humiliated by the knowledge of the truth that Frank has himself driven home to her, namely, that he has not lost his head entirely, though she has entirely lost her heart, she has still a remnant of honour left with regard to her relations with this girl to whom Frank Forest belongs. She shrinks from May's caresses. She gives a decided negative to May's proposition that they "shall go together to her mother's house, and sit in her own dear little room, and have a nice comfortable talk" before the Misses Forest come home to join them. She portrays no manner of interest in May, in fact; but the bride-elect displays no consciousness of being chilled or hurt.

There is a great display of affection between Frank's mother and Frank's future

wife presently, when the former comes down in a graceful morning wrapper, a good deal of motherly pride and of auntly displeasure. Mrs. Forest loves her son as a clever reflection of herself, and she likes safe girls with money. Now May is essentially a safe girl, and her money is an even better established fact than her discretion.

She is a slight, tall, admirably arranged woman, this mother of the Forests. One of those women whom the combination of carefully selected phraseology, elegant dresses, and goodly stature, unite in elevating into an atmosphere of something that almost approaches dignity. A woman who has known riches and honour in her day, and who has had her experience of the black side of life also, in the shape of poverty, the falling away of friends, and a general inability to keep the wolf from the door. It must be credited to her powers of management under these latter circumstances, that she always secured to herself such an amount of personal comfort and freedom

from the lower forms of self-abnegation as tended materially to preserve the good effects of her originally graceful figure, and unruffled mien, manners, and face.

What marvel that such a woman, she being not entirely selfish be it understood, should shrink, now that the sun is shining upon her again, from any alliance for her children that might cast them into the bleak shade of poverty? Her own riches had all taken wing once upon a time, and her husband, a stock-broker, had toiled and wearied and dragged on a generally miserable existence after that episode, until he achieved a competence for her and her children. Having fulfilled his destiny by realizing this noble aim he died, or as she expresses it to this day—"He was mercifully removed before he had the opportunity of risking all that stood between me and despair."

As far as the disposition of the money is concerned, she is the sole arbiter of her children's fates and fortunes, for it is settled unreservedly upon her. But she has never

been an unwise woman in this matter. She has been liberal to her children. She has made her son feel that he is the master of the house in which they all dwell. In all that concerns himself alone she has made Frank feel that he is free as air. But when it came to the matter of his marriage some short time since, she told him that, "This was a matter that concerned his family, and that it behoved him to clearly ascertain what Miss Constable's prospects were before he committed himself to formally proposing to her."

"Understand this, Frank," she had said ; "if you marry a girl with money, you will have your rightful share of the poor equivalent your father made me for what he lost for me ; but if you marry into poverty, it will very justly go to your sisters, for they will never be able to look for help from you."

"And supposing they choose to marry poor men ?" he had suggested.

"In that case they will be very uncom-

fortable, for I should certainly never encourage such folly by making them any allowance during my life."

The result of this confidential converse with his mother was to hurry Frank on very perceptibly in his love-making to May Constable. The cold, frigid opposition to any other element than wealth in the affair stung all that was generous within him, and he had pledged himself and his honour pretty deeply to the girl, before he found out that she amply fulfilled the one condition his mother had named as the essential.

This condition being fairly ascertained now, Mrs. Forest has little pity on and no patience with that undefinable something which her quick eyes see is growing up between her beautiful niece and her handsome, clever son.

"If my brother had only been honest enough to tell me what a witch his Kate is, I would never have been weak enough to put her in Frank's path. Having committed that error, I can only repair it by

putting her out of his path as quickly as possible."

This thought has been her constant companion, day and night, for the last week ; but she has been unable to break the chain of habitual intercourse which has easily and naturally formed itself between the young people. This morning, however, there has been something a little too tender and true in Kate's pride in her cousin's success. Therefore his mother has spoken—with what effect has been seen.

There is a good deal of barely-suppressed scorn in Kate's face, as she looks on in silence while Frank's mother and Frank's bride-elect embrace and congratulate each other about "Duplicity."

"You must go and be very proud of him to-night, May," Mrs. Forest says ; and May says she is not sure about going, if he will stay at home with her instead :—

"He must have had enough of those horrid theatres, poor boy ; so I shall make him stay with me to-night," she says,

with an air of having authority over him, which goads Kate into saying—

“Your suggestion will be most flattering to him—on the second night of his piece.”

“Ah! but I don’t mean to flatter him too much,” May says, with unfeigned earnestness; for she is not exactly keen of comprehension, and she is extremely desirous that Kate should understand that, as an engaged young lady, she is in the position of the flattered, not the flatterer. To say that Mrs. Forest feels indignant with her niece for being cleverer than May Constable would be unjust, perhaps. But, certain it is that she feels mortified and angry, and the anger vents itself on Kate.

“There is something more flattering to a man, my dear, in the fact of the girl he loves desiring his society, than in her wishing to go and see his play even: the author is dearer to her than his work.”

“That’s just what Miss Mervyn meant,” self-satisfied May says—bringing all the power of her weakness to bear on the ex-

planation—"but Frank bears spoiling well ; we will spoil him all our lives, won't we, Mrs. Forest ?"

"Frank is more likely to spoil you, darling," Mrs. Forest says. But there is no genuine ring about her tones ; and Kate has the comfort of feeling that, in order to keep things straight, the mother has to do a good deal of the love-making for the son.

For some reason or other, Mrs. Forest takes an early opportunity of turning the conversation away from the dramatic interest of the present, and causing it to run in the domestic channel of the future.

"I have been telling my niece, Kate," she says, "that, when she pays us the next visit, she will find it much pleasanter ; you will be able to chaperone her then."

"You have never worded the affectionate forethought to me, Aunt Marian," Kate says, suavely ; and then she goes on to turn the tables on her perhaps unconscious tormentor, by speaking of the trial that is laid upon

every woman during the first year of her married life—the dread, namely, that she may bore her husband out of even the semblance of affection for her.

“No woman with a properly regulated mind need have that dread,” Mrs. Forest puts in, hurriedly. “This dear girl, for example, even now, though she can’t give him the full sympathy which she will give when she is his wife—it’s beautiful to see how he turns to her from all the excitement and intoxication of worldly flattery and success. It’s beautiful to me, very beautiful.”

“So it is to me, very beautiful,” Kate says, quietly; and May beamingly avows that she never felt afraid of boring any one in her life, and that Frank likes being quiet: he often doesn’t speak a dozen words to her of an evening.

“But he likes to hear mamma and me talk,” she adds; “and we chatter on about—oh, about anything, you know, just as if he wasn’t there.”

The two Miss Forests come in happily at

this juncture ; happily for Mrs. Forest and Kate, that is, but with no special air of happiness about themselves.

"There was no one out to-day, positively no one," Miss Forest says in answer to some inquiries as to whom she has seen ; and then she adds, as if he were altogether outside the pale of anybody's interest, "We had a bow from Mr. Graham, mamma, and when we came away Marian was weak enough to let him come up and tell her that he would call here to-morrow."

"I shall not be at home to him," Mrs. Forest says, decisively. Then she goes on to explain to the all-important May Constable, that she really cannot receive a man at her house who has "been dismissed the service." May says "of course not," with equal decision, although she has not the faintest notion as to the amount of ignominy that is the righteous due of such an offender.

"Clement Graham has effrontery enough for anything," Gertrude Forest puts in com-

plainingly ; and she is rather surprised when her cousin Kate comes to her and says—

“I do admire your thoroughness in tracking down misfortune, Gertrude ; what is his unpardonable sin ?”

“He was such a nice young fellow,” Marian says, in a superfluous way that is infinitely disagreeable to her mother and sister. “And he used to be here with Frank a great deal—it was he introduced Frank to you, May, you ought to stand by him—and he was getting on so well in the Navy, and he was turned out because he wouldn’t tamely submit to being badgered by a superior officer ; that’s the whole truth, mamma : I may not have put it prettily, but that is the truth.”

“I like the way you have put it,” Kate says, coming forward, with a quiet determination to be heard that ensures her an audience ; “we are all so lenient to the wrongdoer who escapes unpunished, and so virtuously severe on the one who is found out ; Marian is in a minority, I know, but

I'm with her entirely in such a matter as this."

"My dear Kate, I knew you had a good many girlish follies clinging about you still, though you have attained years of discretion; but I thought you had passed out of the stage of effusive enthusiasm about a cause of which you know nothing," Mrs. Forest says, and she pats May Constable's hand as she speaks, and looks for a smile of sympathy on that young lady's face; of sympathy with the half-contemptuous tolerance she is expressing for her niece.

"I hope the folly of believing that the sin is not one bit the blacker because the sinner is found out, will cling to me to the last, Aunt Marian; for to a certainty all my other follies will, and I shall need the leaven of a little charity to lighten them," Kate makes answer, with great apparent good humour; but all the while her heart and her mind are in revolt, against the absolute necessity circumstances have forced upon her of concealing a natural hearty womanly

paroxysm of remorse, as she listens to the slighting mention which is being made of a man who had done her a certain good service in by-gone days. A service for which she might never thank him, which she might never acknowledge even, for fear of bringing confusion upon others—a service which he had rendered to her as a woman, and not as the beautiful, bewitching Kate Mervyn, whom most men delighted to serve. But, for all that, a service which had bound her in such grateful chains to him, that now as she hears unjust, slighting mention made of him, she would give anything to stand forth and proclaim the truth, and say why Graham fell—if she dared.

But somehow or other the consciousness of her own cowardice stung her this day to a sharper degree than it had ever done before. So “she is much gentler and quieter altogether,” Mrs. Constable says to the Forests, when luncheon is over, “than she seems to be in society. May is quite taken with her, I assure you ; but then May can

afford to be generous to other pretty girls, you see."

"Everybody is taken with Kate; May isn't displaying any uncommon generosity," Marian says, uncompromisingly.

"If there is a girl in the world of whom I could be jealous, it is Kate," Gertrude adds by way of making things pleasant. But Mrs. Constable is a tepid-natured woman, steeped in a vapour bath of satisfaction with things as they are. And so, in answer to these rather outspoken alarmists, she only says:—

"Ah! my dears! you haven't either of you known what true love is yet. May and Frank have found it out before you, and I have no more fear of either of them changing, than I have of their not being as happy as my husband and I were, when they are married."

May's mother speaks with a tear or two in her eyes, and the Forest girls feel uncommonly sorry for themselves. "Private theatricals at three o'clock in the afternoon!

appalling !” Gertrude thinks, while Marian, with practical kind-heartedness suggests—

“ Mrs. Constable, May can afford to be generous, and all that sort of thing, of course ; but do you quite think she can afford to be indifferent ? She thinks no more of what he has written for the stage than if he had merely written a motto for a bon-bon cracker ; do you think now that that can please him ? ”

Mrs. Constable does her best to tackle the question, which is asked in earnestness. She wrinkles up her brow, she purses up her mouth, she shakes her head, and she sighs : this last being an utterly mentally bewildered woman’s last resource. Having done all these things, she says, at last, reflectively—

“ My dear Marian, I think those wives are wise who let all business cares drop off from their husbands, as soon as they come home. If May takes my advice (and I shall always be near, I hope, to advise and direct her), she will never refer to anything

connected with his work when her husband comes home for peace. Mr. Constable and I were the happiest couple in the world, but I never questioned about what might be going on in his business establishment; he left all those interests behind him, when he left the city; and all through the course of our married life, I never woke him once from his sleep in that arm-chair over there, to ask what he had bought or sold."

"Frank's wares are rather different," Marian says, undauntedly, and Mrs. Constable shakes her head rather sadly, in reply to this, as she answers—

"I know—I know, my dear. He's only a literary man; but if he makes her happy, I will be contented."

The afternoon is becoming very sleepy, conversation flags, and they one and all wish to get apart from one another. Kate finally breaks the chain that binds them, for she requires to rest, and think, rather severely, before she dare trust herself to meet the successful dramatist, her cousin, to-night.

CHAPTER III.

CAUTION.

“I, too, would rather ‘meet a bear robbed of her whelps,’ than a fool in her folly,” Kate Mervyn says to herself; and she shrugs her shoulders anything but resignedly when she finds herself in a box at the Parthenon this night, with Mrs. Constable and May for her sole companions.

The Misses Forest have found occupation more congenial than “listening to Fame blowing her trumpet about Frank;” therefore, they have not come. Frank is feverish and excited about many things. He prefers the back of the stage to a seat between May Constable and his cousin Kate. Here, at least, he is spared a sight of the amiable face of his beloved, over which no shadow of feeling flits by any chance. He is also

spared hearing her criticisms on "Dupli-city," which are of an order to make strong men weep.

Kate's feelings are complex. On the whole, though she delights in Frank's mere presence, her delight is considerably chastened by the little airs of having the sole right to him, which May is addicted to displaying. On the other hand, Kate would almost rather endure this pain, which is inflicted under her own observation, than suffer the pangs of uncertainty which torment her whenever he flees the box and goes "behind." For he has been heard to declare that the two actresses who play the principal parts in his drama are "two of the prettiest and most attractive women in London."

The memory of this remark rankles in her breast, and corrodes her peace of mind. She longs to ask him if he really thinks so, or if the opinion has proceeded from the fertile brain of his sister Gertrude, and simply been fathered upon him. If she

had the courage to ask him this, one cause of jealous pain would be removed instantly. For Frank is quite ready to avow now that this declaration was made "in his salad days, when he was green of judgment," namely, before his cousin Kate came to town.

"This way madness lies," poor Kate thinks, when Mrs. Constable—upon whom the meaning of it all has only just dawned—insists upon explaining the plot so far as it has proceeded. This lady likewise animadverts upon the conduct of the characters, or rather severely censures the actresses by name, for fulfilling their respective missions, and speaking Frank Forest's lines with effect.

"Well may it be called 'Duplicity,'" she says, shaking her head in virtuous indignation, "making love to other men, and deceiving their poor husbands, like the nasty brazen things they are. How Frank can talk about May knowing them by-and-by, I can't imagine."

“But I suppose it’s all in the piece,” May cuts in; and her partial apprehension is almost as intolerable a thing to Kate as the muddle of misapprehension in which the elder lady’s mind is involved.

“It doesn’t make them a bit the better, if it is all in the piece,” Mrs. Constable says, her head quivering with irate feeling. “How Frank can allow it, and encourage it, surpasses my understanding altogether. Poor fellow! to be obliged to do such things for money!”

“In a little time he won’t need to do it,” May says, complacently. “What are they laughing at now? I don’t see the wit of their jokes; do you?”

“Perhaps Frank will instruct you,” Kate says, worn out of all patience. As she speaks, Frank, accompanied by another man, comes back into the box.

“Let me introduce Captain Bellairs to you, Kate,” he begins, forgetting, in his eagerness to make his beautiful cousin known to his most distinguished club

acquaintance, that Mrs. Constable and May have the claim to the first attention. But he remarks it as Kate, with an expression in which rage and appeal are strangely mingled, looks up at the stranger, after just bending her head. So the onus is removed from Miss Mervyn of having to throw herself into a conversational brush with this stranger instantly.

Mrs. Constable and May are quite equal to the occasion. Women with nothing particular to say invariably say it with facility. Captain Bellairs, with Irish adaptability, is quite ready to discuss and denounce "Duplicity" with them, notwithstanding the fact that it is a piece in which he greatly delights. Indeed he is quite ready to do anything that may distract attention from the girl on the opposite side of the box, until she has been given time to recover herself.

For they have met before, this pair, and met in a way that makes Kate burn as she recalls the manner of it. Met in a way

and parted in a way that may affect her whole life—that damages her in meeting him again—that drives her nearly to desperation, as she reflects that she dare do nothing active to prevent a recurrence of the meeting.

If it should ever get known, that story of hers which, if known, would ruin her with that correct, calculating piece of iced virtue, her aunt, Mrs. Forest! The girl battles down her naturally defiant spirit as this horrible contingency occurs to her, for the piece of iced virtue is Frank's mother!

Frank is growing dearer to her every hour in which she is thrown in his society. Intellectually, sympathetically, socially, they have become as one, almost. It is only in heart that they seem to keep apart, and the seeming is growing a direful burden to Kate, as she learns more and more of the mate Frank has drifted into choosing for himself.

She makes one little abortive attempt to get clear of the mesh, instead of involving

herself in it further. "Frank," she whispers, "is this man a good friend for you, do you think? an idle, expensive, rackets sailor? What good can much of his society do a literary man who is not playing at his work?"

"Marryat was an expensive, rackets sailor, Kate," he laughs. "Was he a bad companion for literary men who were not playing at their work, do you think?"

"This man is a disgrace to the profession that Marryat's name ennobled," the girl answers, angrily; "trust to my intuitions, Frank—I don't like him; have done with him for my sake; don't ask him to your house."

She puts all her power of pleasing into her entreaty. She puts her hand most persuasively in his. She puts some of the feeling that fills her heart into the glance that steals from her eyes. But still Frank resists her.

"He's a great chum of mine, and both the girls adore him; Gertrude seems quite

satisfied with her chance, so you had better fling your intuitions overboard, dear, for probably you'll have him for a cousin."

"I have heard that he is married already," she says; and a pang of humiliation nearly chokes her, as she recollects the way in which she had heard it.

"Married!" Frank laughs softly; "rather a joke that. I've known Bellairs very well for three or four years; he wouldn't have kept a wife dark all that time; who told you?"

She shakes her head, and turns it away from him, wishing bitterly that she had let matters take their course, rather than put herself in the position of being questioned on this point. For, as must have been already divined, Kate Mervyn is the girl who rode from Torquay into Newton Abbott on a summer day, "to see the last" of the man who had been pleasing her taste, and raising her hopes, and contemplating her downfall, during the dazzling days of the Torquay week.

“The fact is, you’ve taken an impressionable woman’s dislike to him,” Frank says to his cousin, the following morning, when he has insisted on resuming the topic of Captain Bellairs. “Is it a case of being piqued, dear? Poor little May doesn’t often carry off the honours when you’re present; but she did last night as far as Bellairs was concerned.”

Frank laughs, even as he speaks, at the absurdity of May Constable carrying off the honours from Kate under any combination of circumstances; and Kate feels her cheeks burning, as she thinks of one or two glances that Captain Bellairs had flashed at her, unseen by either of the others, from his place by May Constable’s side.

She feels in the toils indeed. She can never appeal to the Forests for protection from the renewal of the insult; for where would she be with Frank, if the story of her escapade were ever told to him? What a cruel Nemesis that brief madness—that bygone folly is becoming to her! “It has

stained me for life," she thinks hopelessly, as she looks at Frank, who is drifting deeper into love with her every moment, and who nourishes the belief that she has never given so much as a thought to any man before him. -

His mother, by her injudicious interference the previous day, has hurried on the crisis which she is ready to move heaven and earth to avert. Above all things now, Frank feels that he "must get out of it with May," though how he is to do it is an unsolved problem yet. Kate is the one woman in the world for him, and the thought of being tied for life to May makes him desperate; good taste, manly feeling, common humanity, all combine to prevent his declaring himself Kate's lover before all the world yet. But he feels that she must know it this day, for through want of knowledge on her part, he may lose her yet.

He blesses his mother's habits of morning indolence, and his sisters' steady pursuit of

excitement in the Row—this morning, as he sits with Kate alone. The little morning room is full of soft warmth and floral fragrance. The light is sweetly subdued, so is Kate. The hour is his own, and he longs to assure himself that the woman is also.

She is making no pretence of working or of doing anything, save existing for her own pleasure and his. She is seated on a corner of the sofa, and he is on a lower chair by her side, and his very attitude is expressive of the worship he feels for her, as he bends forward, in the earnestness with which he seeks to enchain her attention.

Ah ! how willingly she cedes it to him, in spite of her knowledge of his being bound to another woman : in spite of the way in which memory is stinging her about that first love of hers—Captain Bellairs : in spite of her firm conviction that they are both altogether wrong !

It is no use trying to avert her eyes, they will steal back, and meet his. It is no use moving her hand away from his clasp.

It is no use her whispering, "Frank, Frank, remember!" She has shown her feelings for him too fully for him not to be ready to forget everything in the world but herself, and so, without a word being uttered, they understand each other, and break down all barriers "at the touching of the lips."

What is it that presently sends them apart, with a little shock that makes Kate shudder? He unclasps his arms from the form he had been embracing only a moment before, and turns almost coldly away; and Kate gets her first lesson in the stern school wherein it is taught that love is its own avenger—her first taste of the agony of being enslaved by a man who is perpetually making manifest the conflict that goes on in his mind between honour and inclination, love and duty. Kate's hand has accidentally pressed the ring he wears in token of his troth to May, and the slight pressure has reminded him of his bondage, and of the difficulties that will surely beset him, if he attempts to escape. He remembers all

the curiosities of May's character in a moment. May is lymphatic, but May is a leech in her power of clinging to anything upon which she has set her heart; and it does not flatter him now to recollect that she has set her heart very strongly upon marrying him. He feels as if he were bound hand and foot by a number of little galling chains, which will take an immense deal of time and trouble to break. It may be added that Frank does not like trouble, and shrinks from the prospect of it.

His cousin sits still as he has left her, only she shades her eyes and bends her head down on the arm of the sofa. She will not speak, for how utterly idle any words that she can say will be—how entirely powerless to improve the position. But that Frank should stand away from her in constrained, pained silence is inexpressibly distressing to the girl who loves him, in spite of that comprehension which has just been forced upon her of his vacillating nature.

Meanwhile drear visions of outraged Constables, who "will bother him awfully," are passing before his eyes. May is not an only child, unfortunately. She has a married sister with very pronounced views as to the proper meed of respect to be observed towards "the family;" and she has a brother, a clergyman, whose powers of trying to teach other people to do their duty, especially towards the Constables, are never-failing. The amount of worry it will cause every one, the horrible talk there will be, the nuisance of it altogether, stultifies Frank Forest, and renders him speechless for the space of a few minutes, which seem like long hours to poor Kate.

At last he turns, goes up to her side, and bends over her.

"Kate," he says, "do forgive me; will you?"

"For what?" she asks; for she is really in doubt as to whether he is apologizing for his heat or his coldness.

"For being—a little mad just now. I'll

be more cautious in future. I must be more cautious, for your sake."

"For my sake?" she repeats, with something of contempt expressed in her voice and in her lifted eyebrows. "Till when must you be cautious?"

"Till I see my way," he says, vaguely.

She rises up impetuously, puts her hands on his shoulders, and forces his eyes to meet her own, in order that she may read the truth there.

"I don't want to extenuate my own conduct in getting to care for you," she says swiftly; "but, Frank, can you have kissed me as you have done, and yet love me so little that you can rack my heart to pieces with caution? One of us must suffer. Am I to be the victim?"

"Captain Bellairs," the small page announces in a large voice, which is, happily for Kate, sent into the room before the guest.

CHAPTER IV.

VERY TRYING.

SHE is almost breathless from the expenditure of passionate force with which she has uttered her half-defiant, half-reproachful appeal. If she were longing to greet him with kindly words, she could not articulate them now to Captain Bellairs. The utmost she could do to a friend who had appeared on the scene so inopportunately would be to give her him hand while she recovered her breath. The utmost she does do to this man, whom she regards as her worst enemy, is to give him a stiff, repellant bow, and turn away as if he did not exist for her.

It is humiliating, as far as Kate is concerned, to be compelled to confess that as soon as he has recovered from the brief

shock of the sudden announcement of his friend's name, Frank Forest feels infinitely relieved by the interruption. He has a dim, indistinctly outlined feeling that the time is not ripe for the overthrow of that alliance with May which has grown to be so distasteful to him. At the same time, he is prepared to think Kate unconscionably unreasonable, if she does not suffer things to "go on as they are between them." In fact, this first step in the wrong direction, which he has taken, is already bringing its own punishment upon him ! It has led him into an atmosphere which will rapidly develope all that is weakest and worst in his character, namely, his love of present ease, even at the cost of future ignominy.

It is in accordance with a plan made on the previous night, by the two men, that Captain Bellairs is here this morning. The plan is that they shall drive out into the country beyond Richmond, to try a tandem which Captain Bellairs has just set up. The horses are fidgetting about outside the door,

under the care of a couple of grooms ; and Kate finds herself looking at them with interest, and longing to say something about them, even to their owner ; horses have such an attraction for her !

As Frank leaves the room to change his coat, and look for his gloves, Bellairs boldly breaks the barrier of inattention and silence which Kate has erected between them. He holds his hand out to her, he looks her straight in the face with a look that surely expresses genuine regret, and says—

“Forgive me! I’m not such a bad fellow as you had reason to believe me.”

“And I am not the girl you befooled so cruelly at Torquay,” she answers quickly ; “between then and now seven years of remorse for a fault that was hardly mine—seven years of concealment of a shame that was forced upon me—seven years of outraged feeling against the man who would have gathered and left me to wither as idly and carelessly as a weed—are lying.”

She stops, not because words even harder

and more severe than those which she has already uttered are failing her, but because her throat is parched and stinging, and she is physically incapable of uttering those words. He takes advantage of the pause to say—he has the tact to say it in easy unemotional accents, in case those accents may fall upon other ears than Kate's—

“For seven years you have been nourishing a bitter mistake; give me an opportunity of rectifying it—or rather show me the generosity you would extend to any other man, and believe me on my word of honour when I tell you, that I contemplated no wrong to you, that I would have done you no wrong, even if that *Irrepressible* hound had not interfered and made me seem a scoundrel.”

“I dare not tell you what I think of you,” the girl says, quivering with passion at what she thinks his mean evasion of the charge she has so righteously brought against him; “it seems to me your denial of the fault, and your shameful mention of Mr.

Graham, after your persecution of him, are worse crimes than the fault itself. Your word of honour! Your honour had gone before you took that young girl, whom I am no longer, as a pastime, while you were on your way to your wife."

"No woman has any claim on me; believe that, Kate," he says, eagerly. "Graham spoke under the influence either of malice or a mistake. I believe it was the former. You, in turn, believe me, when I tell you that no woman in this world, excepting yourself, has any claim on me."

"Don't except me, let me pray you," she says, longing, in her impatience, to go and shake the truth out of this man, who goes on trying to deceive her still (as she thinks) so calmly. "What have you done with your wife? Has your conduct killed her? Did she ever hear of the rascality that Clement Graham stopped just in time?"

"The lady he spoke of has never been seen by me from that day to this. I tell you he made a mistake."

“Why did you not rectify it on the spot?” she asks, in the exacting, doubting tone of a woman who can’t be convinced. “You might have done it.”

“I could not do it before you.”

“He spoke openly enough before me ; but he had no need to draw on his powers of invention.”

“I could not give the explanation before you then,” Captain Bellairs says. And his accents lose their calmness and become agitated. “But if you will trust me—if you will let the feelings you had for me then revive—if you will once more promise to be my wife, I will give it to you now.”

She longs to solve the mystery—she is burning with curiosity to hear his story, although she is determined not to believe it. Her glance falls under the boldest, truest gaze a man has ever bent upon her face.

“Is she dead ? ” she asks in a low tone.

“I can’t tell you. She has no claim on me, living or dead.”

“Is she divorced?”

“Why this persistence, Kate? Do believe me, and be satisfied when I tell you that, whether she be living or dead, she has no claim on me.”

“You deserted her—I am sure of that—as you would any other fool who trusted you.”

“I would never desert a woman under any circumstances; and I would never sacrifice one jot or tittle of her happiness to the prejudices of the world. Come, Kate, trust me now, and I’ll tell you the whole story by-and-by.”

“Did you ever tell the whole story to Mr. Graham?” she asks.

“No!” he says, with sudden, savage sternness. “He had no right to seek to unravel it.”

“I have told my cousin Frank that you’re a married man,” she says, with provoking calmness, and looking at him with contemptuous defiance. “I said out the truth in an injudicious rage, and put myself in the

position of being questioned by him about—about what I wouldn't have him have the faintest glimmer of a suspicion of for the world," she winds up with, shudderingly.

"Is interest in Forest the cause of your refusing to revive your interest in me?" he asks, looking at her penetratingly. "For Heaven's sake remember he is not a free man; check your interest in him, it will bring misery upon both of you."

"Were you free when you beguiled that girl from Torquay?" she asks, tauntingly; and he has only time to say solemnly, "I was," before Frank comes back to them, full of the feeling that it would be very pleasant to him to have Kate's companionship during the tandem drive.

During his brief absence he has reasoned himself round to the belief that it would be morally wrong of him to do anything definite in the way of checking the intercourse with Kate that has grown to be so desperately dear to him. A man is nowhere commanded to give up his cousins and cleave unto his

wife ; moreover, May is not his wife yet, and never will be his wife, if Kate will only be moderately temperate and patient. Frank feels now that really it all may go on very pleasantly and properly “until he can quite decide how it will be best for him to act,” if only Kate will assure him that all her soul and strength are bowed down at his feet, and at the same time will retain a lively remembrance of the fact of “May having a claim on him still.”

Just in the present he has that craving for Kate’s companionship which few men hesitate to gratify when they can do it with impunity to themselves. Perhaps the reason that they indulge it so freely while it lasts, is the full knowledge they have that with them it will last such a very short time. “’Tis odour fled as soon as shed.” Even “forbidden fruit” is sure to pall upon their palates long before the poor fruit (which wouldn’t be “forbidden” if it could help it) learns what its true flavour is to its taster. Frank likes the prospect that is before him

now of a rattling burst over a good road, behind a couple of fresh horses. For the perfecting of that enjoyment, in order to finish and polish it, he needs the soft element of sympathy, and Kate can give it to him, will give it to him, if she goes. Therefore, Kate must go.

“Can’t we do without your fellows, Bellairs?” he asks; “the girls are just home, and Gertrude wants to go with us; you’d go, too, Kate, wouldn’t you?” he continues in the elaborately indifferent accents which never deceive the initiated.

“With all my heart,” Captain Bellairs says eagerly, but Kate shakes her head. With all her heart, too, would she go, for she loves Frank and horses, and to be with the two together, even in peril, would be very pleasant to her. But she is trying to vow, and to adhere to her vow—that never again, of her own free will, will she be in the society of the man who had tried to do her the bitterest wrong of all.

Presently, with a swirl and rush that is

partly due to the richness of the silk composing the costume she has put on for the benefit of Captain Bellairs, and partly the result of her impatience to meet him, Gertrude Forest comes into the room. Instantly there is sufficient babble raised for Frank to say to Kate, under cover of it—

“Come with us, do! do, Kate! if you refuse me that, I shall think——”

“You have no right to think,” the girl whispers in return, and she tries to make her tones hard and cold. But her eyes are not cold, neither is her heart. “It would be incautious,” she goes on mockingly, “if I were to go out with you this morning, after——”

“But——” he is beginning again, just as Gertrude swoops down upon them.

“Kate, dear,” she begins affectionately, “please come up with me, and exercise your fascinations on mamma. Frank is so good-natured to us, that it seems barbarous to refuse any little request of his” (if this is really the case, the Misses Forest are

barbarous to their only brother, on an average, a dozen times a day); "he has set his heart on my going out with them to-day; now, if you won't go, I can't!"

This statement is made by Miss Forest as she conveys her cousin up to the chamber of the mistress of the house. Good-nature and inclination combine to make Kate lend a willing ear to it.

"Take Marian," she suggests haltingly, and Gertrude answers,—

"Marian pretends to distrust his tandem-driving powers, because she knows she would find it dull to be perched up behind with Frank. Oh, Kate, do go, there's a darling; do go if mamma says yes! I would do it for you, if you had set your heart on going: I would, indeed, Kate; and I have my reasons," she winds up in a whisper, as they pause at her mother's door.

Kate wavers, doubts herself and everybody else, remembers Frank, forgets May, and promises that if Aunt Marian agrees to the plan, well then, so will she.

Gertrude puts her proposition before her mother very cleverly. According to her, Frank and Captain Bellairs are equally interested in the horses that are to be tried. "You know how careful Frank is, mamma," she says, "and I am a little flattered at his wanting to have my opinion about those horses."

"If your brother wishes it so much, I don't see how I can refuse to let you go," Mrs. Forest says. With well-assumed carelessness, she adds, "Is Captain Bellairs going, too?" Her daughter understands thoroughly that, for conventionality's sake, Captain Bellairs is to be spoken of as quite an accidental circumstance in the tandem drive.

"Who is going with you, Marian or May?" Mrs. Forest goes on.

"Marian won't go, and as for May! for goodness sake, don't make May a point," Gertrude says, shrugging her shoulders; "Kate is going, very kindly."

At this Mrs. Forest opens her eyes a little wider than before; but she merely says,

"Oh, Kate! well be careful, all of you." So it is decided that the quartette shall go out together.

They are on the point of starting, after a spring from the leader that nearly carries him free of the whole concern, and a few jibs on the part of the wheeler, that bring the wheels of the dog-cart into violent collision with the pavement. Gertrude has the seat of honour, in front, by the side of Captain Bellairs, and vainly believes that he is rejoicing in the position as greatly as she is herself. Kate and Frank, perched up behind, have the guilty, happy consciousness upon them of being able to say what they please to each other for the next few hours, without being overheard by the pair in front. There is about them all that spirit of exhilaration which is apt to possess people when they find themselves behind high mettled horses who are linked together in the elastic bonds of a tandem. "Let go," Captain Bellairs cries, and the grooms spring aside from the horses' heads, and they rattle

off up the street, just as May Constable, driving a pretty little Victoria, comes up to the Forests' door.

She sees that couple on the back-seat of the dog-cart very plainly indeed, and a sense of her rights being outraged possesses her on the instant. She makes one feeble little sign with her whip for Frank to come back to her, but the tandem spins out of sight even as she makes it, and Frank heaves a sigh of relief at the impossibility of her compelling him to go back to her; and Kate shyly steals a glance at him, in order to see whether the gladness that fills her heart at this narrow escape is reflected in his face.

"That was a close shave, wasn't it?" he asks, answering her look readily enough; "a minute before, and she might have delayed us."

"Stopped your going, you mean," she says, correctly; "and if you hadn't been let go, Gertrude and I would have lost our tandem drive; blessings on the spring the

leader gave that carried us clear of her and disappointment."

"What are you people talking about?" Gertrude questions. To her annoyance Captain Bellairs makes the attention he has to bestow on his horses the excuse for being taciturn, therefore Gertrude kindly resolves to make her brother and her cousin as uncomfortable as she can by interrupting their *tête-a-tête*. This is malicious, of course: nevertheless it is human.

"We are talking of a narrow escape," Kate answers.

"What! from a tandem?" Gertrude questions; and Kate says, looking at Frank as she speaks—

"No, from a bore."

"Kate," Frank whispers, bending his head down, "don't let the girls get hold of it that you're dead set against May; you'll only make it harder for yourself, and for me too, in the end."

"We're altogether wrong, both of us, I know that better than you or any one else

can tell me," the girl says, sadly; "but I won't palter with the truth, and I won't feign and fawn about May Constable, Frank; it's horrible to me that she should stand in such a position with regard to you."

"Her position is no better than your own," he interrupts eagerly; "and it will all be right soon if you will only be patient; don't give the alarm to them all until it is all right."

She meets his eyes steadily, and his expression is one of passionate, intense love for her; but she is, for all that, conscious of a vague feeling of disappointment and unsatisfaction. As legibly as if it were a book she reads off instability and vacillation on Frank's face, and still she hugs her chains and tells herself that, even if she finds him guilty of worse faults than these, she must still go on loving him. The fact is, that before she detected these traits in him, which are not traits of strength, she had idealized him a good deal. That her passion is for

her own ideal, is a fact. But for all that, she cannot withdraw her interest from the real man. The Frank he is, and the Frank she has imagined into the first place in her heart, are inextricably mixed, and she cannot separate them.

So it happens now, that though in answer to his request that she won't give the alarm "until it is all right," she says—

"It never will be all right with us, Frank," she gives him her hand, and delights in the clasp he gives it.

Meanwhile, as they spin rapidly along the main road to Chiswick, aggrieved May is making her wrongs and her rage known to the mother and sister of the man who has inflicted the one and caused the other upon her. Even turtle doves can peck, if they are "put out," and May, on this occasion, is very much "put out," indeed. Calm Mrs. Forest trembles for her son's future, when May, in tears, declares that she "must open her heart about Frank and his very trying conduct."

CHAPTER V.

“THEY HAVE KILLED HIM.”

“I CAN’T put up with it, and I won’t,” May says for the fiftieth time, when she has narrated the story of the sight that met her gaze as she drove up to the door; and Mrs. Forest has vainly tried to pacify her (for the fiftieth time also) with the words—

“Dearest child, you exaggerate trifles, you make mountains of molehills; Frank is incapable of offering the smallest slight to the girl he has honoured above all the world by selecting her to be his wife. You must be mistaken; if he had seen you he would have come back—that is, if he could have prevailed on Captain Bellairs to pull up.”

“I’m sure I’m not mistaken, and I’m not

at all sure about the 'honour' he has done me. Other people besides Frank like me, I assure you, Mrs. Forest; other people who wouldn't think more of their cousins than they do of me."

"You don't, you can't wrong yourself by pretending to be jealous of Kate, my niece?" Mrs. Forest questions, coaxingly; and May bristles up afresh.

"It's not fair to bring in the question of the relationship in that way; my brother says so. He says she's not so close of kin but what Frank and she could marry if—— if they could, you know; and so she's far enough off in kin for Frank to behave decently about her in regard to me."

"But, my dear May," Mrs. Forest says, aghast, "I thought you liked her, I thought you had some faith in your future husband, and something, darling" (she strives to say this playfully), "like a proper appreciation of yourself."

May bridles, struggles to think of a set of words that shall be at the same time ex-

pressive of dignity and disgust for the necessity of displaying it, and fails.

"Frank is very, very trying, Mrs. Forest," she whimpers. "I shouldn't care about his not being demonstrative to me, if he were not demonstrative to other people; but, as it is, oh! you must think that it's very trying. Everybody notices it, and what can I say?"

"Notices what, dear?" Mrs. Forest asks, soothingly.

"Why, that he doesn't make me the first consideration," May says, wiping her eyes. "It's all very well for him, but it's horrid for me to see people looking as if they thought I cared more for him than he does for me, when I don't, you know, for Frank really is very fond of me. But it's this theatrical work that is ruining him, Mrs. Forest; it's snaring him; one never knows when he is acting and when he is not; he shall give it up."

May flutters all the feathers in her hat in her rage, and tries to give effect to her

words by stamping her foot feebly. Unfortunately for the dramatic success of this last effort, it is made with a vivid recollection of Mrs. Forest's horror of anything approaching to a scene which she does not create herself.

Mrs. Forest half closes her eyes, and looks at her future daughter-in-law steadily. She means this marriage thoroughly. She also means to have her son's wife in subjection to her. But she will not waive her own right of supremacy even in order to attain these two desirable ends.

"I hope you will never let Frank know how foolish you have been to-day, my dear," she says in a superb manner; "he shall never hear of it from me, I promise you that."

Mrs. Forest bends over May, in a sort of pityingly protecting way that adds to that young person's bewilderment considerably. She had come to condemn, and now she is being condemned. She makes one feeble flutter towards reasserting her position.

"It's not too late yet," she says ; "I have that comfort, I am not married to him yet ; I can free myself if I like."

"Poor child ! you must be worried indeed to dream of doing yourself that injury," Mrs. Forest says, in a superior way, that has an immense effect on easily subdued May, "to think of breaking off your engagement with a man because he writes comedies, and goes out for a drive with his cousin ! Poor child !"

"He was looking at her as he never looks at me ; I could see that in a moment," May says, clinging tenaciously to the sore point ; "and she was looking back at him in a way I won't put up with. It's a shame when she knows he is engaged to me ; I wish she would go home."

"I can hardly turn my brother's daughter out of my house : but I, too, wish she would go home," Mrs. Forest says, meditatively ; "not that I fear what you fear, my dear, but because I can't bear to see you disturbed by her presence."

"If I didn't feel perfectly convinced that Frank's heart is mine, I wouldn't put up with it for another hour," May says, relapsing into tears. "I'm sure I never suspected anything until to-day; and I have been very kind and friendly to Miss Mervyn, the deceitful thing."

"What is the matter?" Marian asks, sauntering in at this juncture.

"It's nothing. May is labouring under a false impression," Mrs. Forest tries to explain; but May Constable likes to enlarge on her grievance, and her right of resenting the same. Therefore, she tells the tale of Frank's and Kate's delinquencies over again.

"You can't be surprised at any man admiring Kate," Marian says, carelessly; and the words are not reassuring to bitterly-jealous May. "She's exactly the type of girl about whom men make fools of themselves. I have seen for some days that Frank was losing his head."

"Marian! how can you speak so unguardedly," Mrs. Forest says, reprovingly;

as May, crimson now with jealous wrath, pants forth a declaration to the effect that, if Frank chooses to make a fool of himself, he shall not make a fool of her ; and adds an altogether irrelevant rider as to Marian's iniquity in having kept silence about Frank losing his head.

"It wouldn't have been a very sisterly thing on my part to cause these vials of wrath to be emptied on his head, would it?" Marian asks, with a laugh. Frank is not her lover, therefore it seems a very light matter to her that Frank should flirt with another than his betrothed. "Do be sensible, May," she goes on ; "men will not be tied to any woman's apron-string ; it's folly to expect it. Besides, what a bore a man would be who was perpetually running after you. When I'm engaged, I shall go my way, and let him go his."

"I won't be slighted and made to look ridiculous by Frank or anyone else," May pouts. "I shall go home and tell mamma all about it, and probably send a letter to

Frank before the day is over that will rather astonish him."

"Well, my dear, do nothing rashly; if you do, you will probably be repentant by to-morrow," Mrs. Forest says indifferently. Instinct tells her that May's vague threats mean very little; therefore she feels none of the alarm that would be her portion if she believed that May seriously contemplated breaking off the match that will be the means of bringing so much money into the Forest family.

"I shall go home and tell mamma all about it," May repeats, doggedly. "If Frank thinks that he is going to have everything his own way, he is very much mistaken. I wanted to see him this morning very much indeed. My brother Edgar is going to have a large party, and it will look so bad if Frank is not there. I know that Frank will say he's engaged, and slip out of it, unless I secure him and get him to fix his own evening."

"I shouldn't make so much of him, if I

were you," Marian says. "What does it matter whether he's at your brother's party or not? Your brother never enters into anything that interests Frank, and Frank would be bored, probably, by having to talk to some one who wouldn't understand him."

"I shall be there," May says, loftily.

"Oh! my dear child, I didn't understand that you contemplated carrying Frank off to those regions of bliss, in order that he might spend the evening with you. Don't scowl at me, mamma. I must say what I think about it. May will only make herself unhappy, if she tries to alter and trim Frank's nature to her own pattern." Then, with a sudden feeling of generosity towards the powerless nature before her, Marian goes up to May, and says—"May, I understand Frank better than the others do. Yes, mamma, better even than you do. We have the same natures, and I know that if we are let alone we have a sufficiently strong sense of right to behave properly; but I know this, that if any one tried to put fetters on

my feet I would get free of them, and Frank is like me in this respect. He will never wear the blue ribbon, May; do take my advice, and don't try to put it on."

Marian, out of pity for the weakness of May's hold on Frank's affections, speaks very earnestly, and very tenderly. It does not increase her sympathy for May when that young lady, in the impotence of her vain jealousy, says—

"Thank you, Marian; but I believe I know rather more of Frank than you do; and I am sure he will think you very ill-natured when he hears how you have tried to put me down, and make me behave in a mean-spirited way, as if I were afraid of him, or afraid of losing him."

"Why the fuss, if you are not afraid of losing him?" Marian replies. "For my part, if I had doubts of a man, I'd solve them very soon; but then I should not doubt idly."

"I think the better plan will be for our dear May to come and stay with us for a

time," Mrs. Forest puts in, soothingly, at this juncture; "she will then see for herself that her alarm is entirely groundless; and I know that the arrangement will give Frank great pleasure."

Marian makes a little wry face of dissent at this statement, but May evidently believes it, for she melts under the influence of the proposition Mrs. Forest has made, and after a very brief and faint demur, accepts the invitation.

"I shall treat Miss Mervyn just as usual, and not give her the satisfaction of seeing she has annoyed me," May says, balmily, when she is at last about to depart. "I am very quick at reading character, Mrs. Forest, and I can tell your niece is vain as a peacock and heartless as a stone."

"She has had admiration enough lavished upon her to make any woman vain," Mrs. Forest says, quietly. It is no part of her plan of treatment of her future daughter-in-law, to allow that young person to under-rate any member of the Forest family. Then the

women part with affectionate kisses, and a certain amount of justifiable distrust of one another in their hearts ; and May whirls off in her well appointed little Victoria, with a supreme air of wealth and self-satisfaction.

The scratch pair, driven with commendable skill and discretion, behave as if they had been together all their lives as they trot along the dusty Hammersmith-road. When they reach Barnes Common, the fresh breeze raises the leader's spirits a trifle, and he lays himself out to his work in a way that is not responded to by the wheeler. But Captain Bellairs is driving with a steady hand, and a cool collected brain (in spite of his being a little distraught in spirit by the very low tone of the conversation that is being carried on by the pair on the back seat), and the horses are pulled together with perfect ease.

The sunshine, the brightness of the atmosphere, the natural exhilarating effect of the pace, have all told on Kate Mervyn. As

they near the end of the common, she for the first time addresses Captain Bellairs :—

"I've never forgotten those glorious bays you used to drive up from Plymouth ——"

"I have never forgotten the glorious days when I used to take them up and down between Torquay and Paignton, on the chance of meeting you on Guinevere," he interrupts, turning his head round to look at her ; and in the moment that he does it, the horses lurch to the right, the wheel goes up the bank, for one moment of suspense the dog-cart hangs at a dangerous angle—the next the suspense is over, for the undisciplined pair spring wildly forward, and the dog-cart and its occupants are thrown in a confused heap on to the ground.

Giddy and confused, but neither frightened nor hurt, Kate is the first to rise to her feet, and as she staggers back a step or two she takes in the fact that Frank and Gertrude are unhurt also. They gather themselves up out of danger and the dust, just as Kate, with a little cry, springs to the spot where

their driver, with the reins clenched tightly in his hand, is lying very still. The panting frightened horses have left off plunging and kicking, but——

“They have killed him,” the girl groans out, as she falls down on her knees by the side of the man she had so bitterly reviled this morning.

CHAPTER VI.

“ I HATE BOB-CHERRY.”

THEY have not killed him, but one of them has given him a blow on the left side of his head, and his hair is clotted with blood, and his deep unconsciousness is unquestionably very death-like. It quite justifies Gertrude in the exhibition of fond frantic grief into which she falls helplessly, as Frank and Kate lift the sufferer from the ground, and move him to a softer place on the heath-bordered common.

The sun is blazing out fiercely. The two girls' sun-shades have been hopelessly battered in their fall. They strain their eyes in every direction, in search of a coming carriage or cab. Barnes Common happens to be desolate just at this hour, and im-

mediate aid is what they need. The horses, having done the mischief, are apparently quite easy in their minds. They stand about quietly feeding, making no attempt to get away, or to make any display of spirit whatever. Taken altogether, the group is a very picturesque one.

The two girls hang over the injured man with an utter abandonment to the unrestrained display of human charity, and sympathy with suffering, that is very womanly. In this supreme hour of fear for him, and ignorance as to the extent of his injuries, there is not a single feeling for him, or thought about him, in the hearts and minds of either of them, that cannot well bear the light of day. They aid each other with all their will in trying to save him from the scorching rays. They like each other better as each strives to outvie the other in serving him. Frank admires these sisters of mercy unattached, very much, as they minister to the insensible man. But he is conscious of a twinge of jealous feeling as he recalls

Bellairs's last words, and sees Kate's small cool hand wiping away the grime and the blood from the handsome head.

All this action is compressed into the period of a few minutes. At the expiration of them, Frank goes off to the Barnes station for help and a cab.

"Where shall we take him, when Frank comes back?" Kate asks, abruptly; and as she speaks, a recollection of the wife of whom she has heard crosses her mind! Her secret grows more irksome every day of her life.

"I should say to our house," Gertrude whispers, dubiously. "We don't know his friends—we can't leave him in this state at an hotel; our house is the only place for him, isn't it, Kate?"

Before Kate can reply a brougham which has been rolling along unheard by them, pulls up abreast of them, and a pretty, worn, got-up face looks out at the window. The face is full of commiseration, and the plea she makes that she may be allowed

to help them, is full of earnestness. The nature of the accident is explained to her in a minute by Kate, and the lady gets out of her brougham, and her footman gets off the box to help them, just as Frank comes back, forlornly, having failed in finding any kind of conveyance at the Barnes station.

The lady becomes more urgent than ever in her offers of assistance. She gives them her card, "Mrs. Angerstein, Barnes Cottage."

"Let him be taken to my house," she says, cordially, "I am so near. Oh! do; my husband is a surgeon."

As she finishes speaking she catches sight of the face of Henry Bellairs, with the look upon it of the consciousness that is at length struggling back.

It is all so abnormal, the whole of the day's proceedings have been so extraordinarily out of course, that it hardly creates a feeling of surprise in the breast of any one of them when Mrs. Angerstein turns to them with the sickly pallor of intense agitation upon her cheeks and brow, and says—

"You had better take him to your own place, after all. I remember my house is full. Use my brougham ; good-bye."

But before she can move away from the group round the prostrate man, he opens his eyes painfully, and says—

"Is it you, Cissy, come back to see the last of me?"

The woman he addresses shivers in a way that convulses her whole frame, but she neither responds to his look nor to his words. She gets herself out of the circle that surrounds him, bids them adieu in pantomime, and goes walking back to Barnes, before they can recover their breath and power of speech.

The two girls have taken in the scene, and their minds are full of all sorts of possibilities ; but it is not the time to word their vain imaginings now, nor do they allow the principal actor in that scene to perceive that they have any curiosity on the subject. Captain Bellairs can just stagger to the brougham, when he relapses into a half-

fainting condition that demands their full attention. The side of his head is cruelly lacerated by the kick from the iron-shod hoof, and they see now, what they had failed to see while he was lying on the ground, namely, that his left hand hangs limply down, as if it were broken at the wrist. All the excitement is over, and the three who are in possession of their senses are much too dejected to think of any other course than the first one that suggests itself to them—namely, that they shall take Captain Bellairs home with them. Oddly enough, Kate Mervyn feels no aversion to this plan. The man's danger, the agony he is evidently suffering, above all his utter helplessness, have combined to soften Kate's heart towards him. Freely now would she forgive him if he could only ask her to do it. It seems quite in the order of things that his poor wounded helpless head should find a resting-place on her shoulder. When he opens his heavy eyes, and thanks her, her eyes look back into his with a glance of the

frankest, friendliest, gentlest pity. Her soft small hand steadies his wounded one. She, in fact, is his chief "ministering angel," and Frank and Gertrude find Kate taking the lead of them in a manner they are powerless to combat, and of which they do not at all approve. The thought strikes both brother and sister forcibly, that the sooner Kate Mervyn goes home the better. Frank resolves that he will need country air whenever she does go home, and accompany her, and renew his acquaintance with his Uncle Mervyn; and then from afar, from a position in which he cannot be personally assailed by pleading, break off with May Constable.

Mrs. Forest would be "coy and hard to please" about receiving Captain Bellairs into her house, if he were a needy, friendless man. She would in this case have a vivid recollection of her daughters and her duty, would decline to take such a heavy responsibility upon herself, and earnestly recommend a family hotel or a hospital to his consideration. But Captain Bellairs holds a good

position and has four thousand a year! She therefore avows at once that she is not the woman to shrink from any amount of trouble and responsibility concerning him.

As for him, he feels that he needs the kindly, gentle presence of woman about him now. He is cut down in his strength, he is as helpless as a baby, and he shrinks from the thought of hired watchers by and waiters upon him. Therefore he falls into the arrangement which is proposed to him, that he shall stay here, with a delighted alacrity that makes Gertrude's heart beat with thankfulness.

The most daintily appointed chamber in the house is prepared for his reception, with promptitude and without fuss. Mrs. Forest understands thoroughly how abhorrent delay and feeble uncertainty in the giving of directions are to the heart of man, even when man is in his best mood. She takes care, therefore, that Captain Bellairs glides into his niche in her house without either hesitation or jerks.

"But it will alter our arrangement with dear May," she says in the midst of dinner that night; and as she says it she looks round the family circle, with a look that seems to ask for their support and sympathy in this little domestic difficulty. Then, in firm reliance on the discretion of her son and daughter Gertrude, she adds—

"May Constable was coming here to stay with us for a little time, as perhaps you have heard, Kate dear. What I'm to do about a room for her now I hardly know."

The discretion of her children is proved a broken reed on which to rely, in a moment. Frank scowls, but prudently refrains from speech, and Gertrude says—

"Oh! mamma, why ask May to stay here, when she lives next door as it were; we can't turn Captain Bellairs out for her now, that is certain. It would be worse than inhuman to do it. Frank, you will make May understand it all, won't you?"

Before Frank can answer, Kate puts in her word.

“There will be my room for Miss Constable, Aunt Marian,” she says, steadily; “it is quite time that I should go home; and now with a friend who will require such constant thoughtful care in the house, you can’t care to be burdened with useless visitors. I shall send papa a telegram to-night, and go home to-morrow.”

Mrs. Forest cannot help looking admiringly at her high-spirited niece. In a measure the elder woman fathoms the feelings that actuate the younger one. The same blood runs in their veins, and they both love Frank. But though Mrs. Forest looks admiringly at her niece, she abstains from uttering a word that may cause the girl to alter her resolution. For the mother remembers May Constable’s money, and Frank’s need of it.

“Of course the fewer there are in the house, just at present, the better, dear,” she says, softly; “much as we shall miss you,

we would all, I think, rather have you with us at a happier time."

With a beautiful disregard of anything that does not immediately concern themselves, the two Misses Forest go on their peaceful way, interchanging a few brief sentences between themselves, and leaving their mother and Kate unmolested by a word from them. Their indifference to everything outside their own interests and pleasures is not a mere assumption. It is a genuine thing, consequently it is commendable. If Kate's staying were to be the means of keeping May Constable out of the house, then they would smooth the way to Kate's remaining with soft words and subtle suggestions. But they know well that May is inevitable. Therefore Kate not being an instrument of good—for themselves—they are quite contented that she should depart, without any unnecessary ado being made about it.

"I am sure you're right, mother," Frank puts in with an elaborate air of impromptu

that betrays him to every one ; “ the fewer there are in the house while poor Bellairs is in this state the better. I should feel myself to be awfully in the way, so I’ll be Kate’s escort home, if she will allow me, and renew the acquaintance that was dropped in my infancy with Uncle Frank, if he will put me up.”

This expression of his determination affects each of his hearers differently. He has chosen his time discreetly; the servant is in the room, and Mrs. Forest is not the woman to point out flaws in her family to her faithful retainers. But she is panic-stricken, and angrily vexed at the plan Frank proposes. At the best of times, and under the most favourable circumstances, May Constable has a habit of drawing heavily on her future mother-in-law’s patience. Mrs. Forest feels that an outraged May will be utterly unendurable to her; and still the prize is too precious a one to be lightly lost by a poor man, and a poor man’s mother. She remembers all these

things, manages to smile very suavely on her son, and to say—

“These sudden resolutions of yours generally end in nothing, Frank ; my dear Kate, you’re allowing yourself to be quite upset by this accident to-day, you are looking quite feverish.”

Frank’s two sisters are laughing, with undisguised amusement, at the discomfiture which is the portion of the other three. All May’s movements are awkward in their unprejudiced eyes, therefore so much of the light sympathy which they have to bestow on any one but themselves, they feel rather inclined to give to Kate. Unquestionably, if they are destined in the future to see much of their brother’s wife, they would rather that wife should be Kate than May. Kate would never bore them !

As for Kate herself, what wonder that she looks, as her aunt says, “feverish.” The excitement of hope, the fear that all this, on unstable Frank’s part, may mean nothing ; the thought of what her father will

say when he finds that she has taken away another girl's promised lover ; above all, the dread of never really gaining Frank—all these influences are upon her, causing her heart to beat quickly and the blood to course hotly through her veins. Some moments elapse before she can nerve herself to say—

“ Papa would always be ' glad to see any of his relations, of course ; but I think you will be needed here, Frank. Captain Belairs is likely to be a heavy charge to you for some time, and I don't think that you ought to leave all the responsibility to your mother and sisters.”

It is an admirable sentiment, and it is delivered rather impressively. But Frank knows Kate pretty well by this time, and he understands quite well that her heart is not in her words. He delights in feeling that he has made that girl thrill with pleasure at the prospect of his going with her. She is the queen of his soul just at present, and he rejoices in the power he has

of making her tremble with suspense, and doubt, and anxiety about him. But he takes his triumph very quietly, like a man. It is only women who, in the weak vain-gloriousness of their belief in their affection being reciprocated, vaunt their victories and turn them into defeats prematurely.

There is a good deal of delicate nursing to be done this evening, in the way of pouring cooling lotions on the injured head and hand. To the credit of her charitableness, be it said, that Mrs. Forest does not shirk the task which has been put before her, nor does Gertrude shrink from the sometimes painful office of being her mother's assistant. Thus it happens that Frank and Kate are left very much alone, for Marian prefers a book and an easy chair in her own room, to looking on at the advances and retreats Kate and Frank make towards and from each other.

"Why did you throw cold water on my scheme of going home with you, and seeing Uncle Frank?" he asks, bringing himself up

in front of her, after wandering about the room for a few minutes.

“With Miss Constable coming here, situated as you are with her, it is impossible that you can leave home, Frank ”

“You advanced a very different reason at dinner for my not going.”

“Naturally I did ; could I in common delicacy have pointed out to you before others the real duty which binds you here ?”

“Say you would like me to go with you, Kate.”

“Oh! I hate the game of bob-cherry,” she says petulantly ; and Frank feels judiciously that under “existing circumstances,” he had better not push her any further to-night. Accordingly he falls back upon the untried but apparently safe ground of Mrs. Angerstein.

“Do you think Bellairs had ever seen that pretty woman who picked him up, before to-day ? He called her ‘Cissy,’ did you notice ? but she went off without responding to the recognition : perhaps she’s the wife

you invented, eh!" and Frank laughs gaily at the absurdity of the idea.

"Perhaps she is," Kate says, with scarlet cheeks, as she thinks, "Oh, my story! oh, my story! it will all come out now."

CHAPTER VII.

“MAY IS ONE OF US.”

THE open drawing-room window of Barnes Cottage shows as quietly pretty a domestic scene as the heart can desire or the eyes behold. A good-looking, grave, kindly-faced man is resting through the hot mid-day hours, and his three little children are playing with boxes of dominoes and letters at his feet. Little tables of fantastic shape, black legged and velvet covered, are dotted about, and these are covered with newspapers and magazines, with flowers and foliage and dainty bits of old china. The influence, the undefinable atmosphere of a refined and beauty-loving woman is over everything. All is grace, ease, cleanliness, and comfort in the apartment. The children's

clothes, though they are of the plainest brown holland, absolutely untrimmed, testify to the good taste of the presiding feminine power in that house. It is the home and these are the husband and children of Mrs. Angerstein.

Presently the shadow of a light figure crosses the window, and the next instant Mr. Angerstein has thrown his book aside, and is advancing to meet his wife.

"What, Cissy! back already? anything amiss?"

She turns a tearful agitated face towards him, and puts a trembling hand upon his arm.

"Let us send the children to nurse, Edward," she begins. Then, as the children cluster around her, after the sweet manner of their kind, demanding, "What's mamma got for me?" "Why didn't mamma take me out in the carriage?" she loses courage, self-possession, and patience, and repeats, impetuously—

"Do send the children away, Edward, if you don't want to see me go mad. Any-

thing amiss? Judge for yourself! I found Harry lying half dead on the common, and he has gone home in my carriage, and has heard my name."

"Poor darling!" her husband says, soothingly, as she sinks back in a chair, and covers her face with her hands. He says no more than this, but his tone is very comforting, and so is the pressure of his hand on her shoulder. He is not silent because he has no reassuring words at command, but simply because a group of quick-eared, quick-minded children are bringing all their juvenile powers of comprehension to bear upon the matter. His desire to get them out of the room is to the full as great as their mother's. But the time is not ripe for them to go yet, according to the daily domestic arrangements at Barnes Cottage, and it must be a stern command indeed that would induce the young Ångersteins to forego one of their established rights—especially such a cherished one as this, of being "in mamma's pretty drawing-room."

However, all things come to an end—even the servants' period of dinner—and the husband and wife find themselves alone, before Time has been good enough to calm Mrs. Angerstein's perturbed pulse and fluttering heart. She has fluent command of her voice though, and she tells him rapidly and readily where, and how, she has met Captain Bellairs.

"It was like a voice from the dead, when Harry looked up at me with the old kind, generous look, and said, 'Cissy, you here! Have you come to see the last of me?'"

"Poor darling!" her husband says once more; "you should have had him brought here: those blows on the head ought to be looked to at once; but it must have been trying to you to speak to him."

"Trying to me to speak to him!" she repeats, in accents of most profound amazement. "What do you think I'm made of? Have you lived with me for seven years and found out so little about my nature

as that question implies? I couldn't have spoken to him to save my life."

She almost writhes away from her husband as she tells him this. She bends her head down lower and lower, apparently under the weight of some self-abasing memory. Her tears, he is glad to see, are checked. Tears always make her head ache and do no good; therefore, as a medical man, he objects to them in the highest degree. Her silent passion of grief or remorse, or whatever it may be, is not an actively exhausting condition; therefore he stands by and regards it calmly, kindly, and tolerantly, for he knows he cannot check it.

"I have let myself be too happy here, Edward," she says, after a time; "you see here there has not been a single thing to remind me of a time I had rather forget, not a single association connected with Harry Bellairs; now I shall shrink from the sight of the brougham, and shiver every time I pass the common."

"You're over sensitive, my dear," her

husband says, protectingly; and Mrs. Angerstein blesses him in her heart for being so pleasant and prosaic. "I should be very glad if you would let me see Captain Belairs, and allow me to explain several things to him that would make him think very differently of you; but as you won't allow me to do that, I should advise that you forget this episode as soon as possible. I shall give you tonics and a change of air."

She is a woman who can marvellously soon throw off any mental agony, under the influence of petting and consideration. Her husband has been her husband for seven years now, but he has not ceased to treat her as a precious object. The habit of daily intercourse with her has not taught him to be rougher in his manner, and more irritably and irritatingly exacting in his demands on her courtesy and consideration, than he would dare to be to any other gentlewoman. Altogether Mr. Angerstein may be regarded as a very exceptional man.

"I shall like change of air; and it will do the children so much good too, Edward," she says, eagerly; "not a sea-side place, though, I always get so tired, and burnt, and blistered, and bored; and I have had so much of sea-side places."

"I'll give you six weeks anywhere you like, Cissy; choose your own place."

"I want rest, quiet, fly-fishing, flowers, and very, very few of my fellow-creatures about me," she says, checking off her requirements on the fingers of her left hand. "And I want all these in England. I hate abroad. Oh! I've been so wretched abroad!" she says with a shudder.

"Take your Murray and find your sequestered spot, after dinner," he advises, "and come out now for a turn in the garden. I shall have to run over to Chiswick in half an hour; while I'm away, if I were in your place I would lie down."

"Supposing I hear that he's dead, or raving, while you're away?" she asks, her eyes dilating with horror at the idea she has

conjured up. "I shall dread hearing the sound of the wheels ; I know they will carry bad news."

"Don't listen to it till I come home," he says, cheerily ; "just give your mind to Murray. I don't care what place you settle on—north, south, east, or west—its all the same to me." Thus he turns her thoughts away from the subject of Harry Bellairs, and gives her present peace.

She watches her husband drive off to Chiswick by-and-by, with a lingering, long look of affection, that speaks well for her as a wife. "What a good fellow he is," she says, shaking her head to herself in corroboration of her own statement ; "if he had anything captious or mean about him, I shouldn't feel myself to be half as bad as I am ; but, as it is——" She checks herself, and wipes away a few tears that have disobediently rolled down her cheeks, and takes her way to the nursery with haste, in order that she may remove the impression of being a weary, nerveless mother—which impres-

sion she must have given her quick-witted children on her return home just now.

It is a pleasant, quiet, well-ordered house throughout, from the artistic drawing-room up to the airy nursery, and down to the admirably clean kitchen. All the arrangements go on well-oiled wheels; yet there is no extravagance, no waste, no superfluity. Mrs. Angerstein's normal condition is one of proud love for her home; but to-day she longs to get out of it, for she seems to herself to be drawing her breath guardedly, and to be in this peaceful Paradise on sufferance. She promises her children the excitement of a change, in a manner that inflames their infant minds with a most ardent desire to "go at once;" and then she goes to her room with a batch of guide-books, and selects her sequestered spot very speedily—Dunster, in Somersetshire.

"You will find May the greatest possible comfort to you under these trying circumstances. Such a thoughtful head on such

young shoulders, I am sure I never met with before," Mrs. Constable says, in her most motherly and confidential tone, on the occasion of her resigning her daughter as a visitor to the Forest family.

"May and I never misunderstand each other," Mrs. Forest says, with a little emphatic squeeze of May's hand; "and, troubled as I am now—harassed with anxiety, and watching, and nursing—I am sure our May will be more tolerant to me than ever."

Mrs. Forest has arranged her sentence carefully beforehand, and she says it glibly enough. But, somehow, it falls short of the mark; it fails to impress the Constables with a belief in its being genuine. "There's something more to come," Mrs. Constable thinks, sagaciously, to herself; "Mrs. Forest is not got up in plain black serge and a little close cap for nothing." As she thinks this, Mrs. Constable glances at the plump form of her May, which is arrayed for the occasion in a rather tight, bright mauve

costume, and she half fears that she is about to cast her pearl before swine.

It is the day after the unlucky tandem-drive, and the case of Captain Bellairs is sufficiently bad to justify the signs of being ill at ease which are very visible in Mrs. Forest. "Such a responsibility, such a terrible burden of anxiety," she plaintively murmurs to Mrs. Constable, who replies—

"Ah! yes, to be sure; but then, you see, you have your daughters and your son to help you through it; and I'm sure May will do her part."

Mrs. Forest bends her eyes down in the proudly humble way which may mean so much or so little. "My children are very good to me; without them I could not combat this, anxious as I am to do all that Christian charity demands that I should do for Captain Bellairs."

She pauses here, and sighs, and then says, in her sweetest manner—

"I lose my niece to-day. Dear Kate! All through last night she was the stay and

prop of the house, thinking of everything, doing everything—saving me at every turn—and I lose her to-day. She goes home to-day."

"Miss Mervyn has paid you rather a long visit," Mrs. Constable says, tartly.

Mrs. Forest feels that she is about to be dragged into the thick of the fray.

"Long!" she says, lifting her brows in affectionate wonderment; "I hope it has not seemed 'long' to her, for it has been a mere gleam of brightness, her presence among us. I wish so much that she could have stayed, she would have been such a charming companion for our May."

"Our" May blushes, bridles, and brings her real sentiments to the fore.

"I can do very well without Miss Mervyn dear Mrs. Forest; I don't care for charming companions. I shall have you, and the girls, and Frank——"

"Didn't you know that Frank would not be at home, dear child?" Mrs. Forest interrupts, and she feels that now indeed she is in the heart of the battle.

"Frank not at home!" May says, in the tone of one who has bought and paid for Frank, and who will have him, bitter bad bargain as he may prove to be.

"It may be business, my dear," Mrs. Constable says, with an overdone air of deprecation. "I am sure that Frank would never neglect you for anything but urgent business."

Mrs. Constable nods her head as she says this, and in other indescribable ways throws the glove down well in Mrs. Forest's sight. But Mrs. Forest refuses to see it, and determines that nothing shall make her pick it up.

"Poor boy, I didn't know that he had not had an opportunity of explaining the reason why he must leave home just now to our May," she says, quite freshly, for her maternal instinct tells her that her "boy" is within an ace of losing the Constable connection and money.

"He has had opportunities enough," May says.

"At any rate he might have made one," Mrs. Constable adds; "when a man is engaged, he has no right to behave as if he were free as air."

"Oh! mamma, I am sure I don't want to interfere with his freedom," May puts in sharply; "he may go when he likes, and where he likes, and stay away as long as he likes, as far as I am concerned."

There is unmistakable anger in the girl's accents, and Mrs. Forest cannot help admitting to herself that May has justice on her side. At the same time, she determines to strike a blow for the interests of her son.

"My dear child," she says, in her most grandly maternal manner, "I don't wonder at your feeling a little annoyed, as you know nothing of the circumstances of the case; when you know them, you will be only sorry for us all—for poor Frank more than any one, for he is the sufferer; he has to leave you."

"I am not told what the circumstances are: how am I to feel sympathy?" May

says: indignation, curiosity, and a certain yearning for Frank all struggling to obtain the mastery in her breast.

“It was so sudden, you see,” Mrs. Forest begins, in a low, slow voice. The “circumstances” require a great deal of trimming before they can be made presentable for the Constable eyes.

“What was sudden?”

“The knowledge that family business made it imperative on Frank to go and see his uncle at once came upon us suddenly. Ah! my dear Mrs. Constable, your widowed bark sails in smooth waters—mine is on a very troubled sea; I have only one brother, and he——” Mrs. Forest pauses, for she has not quite made up her mind as to what she shall say about this useful relative of hers.

Mrs. Constable is eager to hear what the extenuating circumstances are, but she is not at all in the mood to be biased by them in a weak, amiable, friendly way. Her maternal instincts are aroused.

"If May takes my advice," she says, "she will come home with me at once, and leave you all unfettered by any consideration for her until Frank can clearly explain to her the cause of his very extraordinary behaviour."

"We can never 'be unfettered' by any consideration for May; she is one of us," Mrs. Forest says, suavely. But the suavity fails to act as oil on the troubled waters, and when Mrs. Constable goes home, May goes with her, and there is discord in Mrs. Forest's breast between family interest and family feeling. She will not surrender May, and the prosperity which May represents, to spare Kate's feelings. But at the same time she will not surrender Frank's right to apparent freedom of action, for all May's wealth.

CHAPTER VIII.

“ I THINK IT INDISCREET, FRANK ! ”

“ FOR all her external mildness, May has a nasty temper of her own, I’m sure of that,” Gertrude says, as she lounges about Kate’s room, watching the latter packing up the few remaining trifles which are still scattered about. Then Miss Forest goes on to tell her cousin of the resentful manner in which the Constables have received the tidings of Frank’s intention of paying a visit to his uncle.

“ Trying to tie a man to her apron-string in that way is so foolish,” she says in conclusion, and she looks interrogatively at Kate as she says it.

Kate makes no response. Apparently she is fully absorbed in counting over her small

stock of trinkets. But Gertrude is not to be easily turned out of the conversational groove in which she has placed herself.

"I should go on a very different plan if I were engaged," Gertrude goes on; "I should let the man feel himself to be as free as air; wouldn't you?"

Thus directly addressed, Kate looks up at last and says—

"I think that I should do everything that is directly opposed to what Miss Constable does; still I don't wonder at her feeling annoyed with Frank about this sudden resolve to go away."

"She is foolish to show it though, isn't she?" Gertrude persists. "He's bound to her hard and fast; her pettishness may make him tug at his chain, but, as mamma was saying just now, he can't break it."

"A man 'can' do whatever he pleases in that way, I should think," Kate says calmly, but her lips quiver. If Frank, "can't" break the chain which binds him to May Constable, then has he behaved very

weakly, perfidiously, and cruelly to Kate Mervyn.

“Not with the Constable family on one side of him and mamma on the other,” Gertrude laughs out; “besides, I don’t think that his aversion to the marriage is violent enough to urge him to take such a decided step as breaking his engagement would be. He’s no reason to do it either, you know; she’s not a bit sillier or more tedious than she was in those days of rapture when he proposed to her.”

“Only he has had time to find her out,” Kate says, carelessly, rising from her knees as she speaks. “I wish I hadn’t agreed to go by such a late train, Gertrude; I wish the ‘good-byes’ were over, for you have all been very kind to me, dear, and I wish it all over!”

Large genuine tears are rolling down Kate’s cheeks. She has not slept for the last two or three nights, and she has had a vast amount of emotional feeling to contend against during the day. She knows that

though she is parting in peace with her aunt, and her aunt's family, now, it will be war to the knife between them when they next meet, if Frank does break his present bonds. This conviction galls her, for, as she says, "they have been very kind to her." Nevertheless Frank is dearer to her than his family, and she knows how it will go with her, if Frank does accompany her back to that quiet little country home of hers, wherein he will have nothing to do but make love.

"We shall miss you terribly," Gertrude answers, touched into something like sincerity by the pathos Kate has employed. "I wish you were May Constable, only you deserve something better than the uncommonly light love which is the only article Frank has to bestow. What fun it has been to be sure," she continues, "to watch the elastic way in which Frank loves and unloves! He used to tumble into a grand passion one night in every week at least, and come out perfectly cured the next morning."

Kate's tears cease flowing, and she looks her cousin very steadily in the face as she says—

“You want me to think Frank more fickle than he is, for some reason or other, Gertrude; but I've got my own opinion of him, and I shall stand by it, I think, until Frank himself gives me cause to alter it.”

“Oh! well, dear, please yourself,” Miss Forest replies. “I thought, perhaps, that a word in season might send you home happier. Just remember this, though, Kate,” she adds, putting her hands on Kate's shoulders, frankly and kindly: “I shall keep my own counsel; I shall not say a word of this to mamma or Marian.”

Kate makes one faint struggle to keep her secret. The struggle is proved ineffectual on the spot.

“A word of what, Gertrude?” she asks.

“I didn't begin the conversation with the idea of making discoveries, Kate, dear,” Gertrude says; “I began it to pass away the time till mamma thinks fit to summon

me to read to Captain Bellairs ; but I have made discoveries while we have been talking. Kate, you're a goose ; you're worlds too good for Frank, though he's a very nice fellow. Let May have him in peace."

"I wouldn't move a hair's-breadth to take him from her," Kate says, with an angry, white face ; and, even as she says it, she remembers how many hairs'-breadths she has moved already on her way to win him ! How pitiful it all is, after all ! The evasion, the mockery, and the snare !

"Go back to smiling Somersetshire, and beam legally upon some active hunting squire, or some amiable, rich rector. No !" with sudden compunction, "that wouldn't suit you, Kate, would it ?"

"I don't think I could breathe in such a perfect air as the rich rectory would probably be ; and I don't want to be held 'a little dearer than his horse' only by a hunting squire. Spare yourself the trouble of mapping out a future for me ; I should never travel by your plan."

She says this with a weary air of irritability that is a new thing in her. Frank's going home with her will be a fatal step, indeed, if nothing more comes of it than the pleasant pastime of love-making for him, and the piteously painful position of being ultimately left by him for cold prudence sake, for her. Better, far better, that she should forego the sweet delight of his society in the present, than that she should get to love it better, to find it essential to her heart's peace, and then to be bereft of it! So she reasons with herself for a weary, hopeless minute. Then she remembers all her own potent charms, all her own winning love, and she banishes all fear of May, all doubt of Frank from her mind.

Frank, meanwhile, has been driven by his mother's strong will, and his own weak desire to smooth over matters, to an interview with May, in which he has to say farewell, and offer an explanation as to why he is compelled to say it for a time. He has been received with sad serenity by Mrs.

Constable—who has no manner of right to sit in judgment upon him, he instantly recollects—and with a great deal of spurious dignity by May. “The dove can peck, and no mistake,” he tells himself, with a laugh, as May looks up with overdone surprise when he enters, and says—

“I hadn’t the least idea of seeing any one this morning. When people call out of season, they must expect to be very badly entertained.”

“But if I hadn’t intruded on you this morning, I shouldn’t have seen you at all, May.” Then he flounders on, awkwardly enough, into the first falsehood he feels himself obliged to tell in the matter, and adds: “I couldn’t have come in the evening, as I have to go down to my uncle’s to-day on family business.”

“Really!” May says, with elaborate indifference, drawing a little basket of flowers towards her as she speaks, and altering the position of a few of their leaves and tendrils. “Mamma, these flowers are not half so good

as those we get from the place in Baker Street."

"I have been so much worried to-day, that I hardly remember where I sent James for the flowers," Mrs. Constable rejoins, plaintively. "And James is just like the rest of the world, very apt to forget his duty for his pleasure. I've no doubt but that he went to the nearest place, in order to save himself trouble."

"Very natural thing to do in this blazing hot weather," Frank says, defending the guilty James, simply because he feels that the speech is a side thrust at himself. "Come May," he goes on, getting himself a little nearer to his liege lady, "are you not going to offer a fellow a little pity, if nothing else, when you hear that he has to travel for several hot hours in a hot train, for the sake of business?"

May's round pale blue eyes emit a little flash; May's rosebud foolish mouth purses itself up unpleasantly; May's manner, which is not fascinating at the best of times,

grows stiff with angry jealousy as she answers—

"I'm sure you wouldn't put yourself to any inconvenience, unless you were to be rewarded for it, Frank, so I can't pity you a bit; I'm not silly enough, whatever you and other people may think, to believe that you don't like going very much indeed."

"Then you think my business is either profitable or pleasurable?" he asks, rising up, and leaning over her laughingly, as he thinks, "I'm getting through it much easier than I expected." Alas! for him, he is not out of the wood yet.

"Please don't crumple my frill, Frank," she says, with maidenly severity. "I wish you'd sit still in your chair, it's so difficult to talk to people when they're fidgeting about; it does give the impression of a person being so uneasy in society, too."

Frank ceases to crumple the frill, and Mrs. Constable takes up the parable.

"I always think it such a pity," she says, "that some friend does not point out dis-

agreeable little tricks and habits to people : that Miss Mervyn, now, her way of moving up and down a room is most objectionable, most objectionable ! ”

“ Oh ! I wasn’t thinking of Miss Mervyn,” May says, petulantly ; “ one doesn’t expect country bred girls to know what they’re about when they go into society ; but I don’t want Frank to take up the family failing.”

“ Write me a handbook of etiquette, and I will read it,” Frank says, good-humouredly, “ but excuse my talking it just now, as I have something else to say.” Then he goes on to explain to May, that business may keep him down in the country for a fortnight or three weeks.

She listens to the rather halting explanation in angry silence, with an almost insulting air of not believing it. A gleam of good humour from her at this juncture, a little effort to please him, a slight appearance of seeming to have trust in him, would win him from his purpose of going away with Kate, and breaking off his engagement

with May. But the latter does not know this, therefore she gives vent to her natural disposition, which is not the gentlest and most generous in the world, and in answer to his remark, says—

"Pray don't think it necessary to explain any portion of your business to me. I thoroughly understand it already."

"I am glad that you do," he says, with good-humoured provoking calm; and then Mrs. Constable joins in the conversation in a bustling, domineering, interfering way that is infinitely disagreeable to a man.

"I think it indiscreet, Frank, to say the least of it, that you, an engaged man, should go travelling about with that young lady alone."

"That young lady is my nearest relation, after my mother and sisters," he says, quietly. His resolution to have done with May is deepening every moment, but he is fully determined not to do or say anything that may be twisted into an act or word of discourtesy.

"The relationship is all rubbish," May says: and Frank feels that he is not proud of her diction.

"However that may be, it is time for me to be off now," he says; and he rises, and goes over to May, wondering whether, in the moment of parting, she will relent a little, hold up her face to be kissed, and so sap his determination.

She does nothing of the kind. "Good-bye, if you are going," she says, barely giving him the tips of her fingers, and resolutely turning from him to the re-arranging of her flowers again. So he goes from her with a cool hand-clasp only by which to remember their hour of parting, and thinks, with a throbbing heart, of how Kate's tiny hand will thrill within his own, when he tells her that he is both true and free.

"I think it indiscreet, Frank, and cruel into the bargain," Mrs. Constable says, half in sorrow, half in anger, as he pauses by her chair and tenders her his hand.

"I can't help it," he says, rather doggedly,

"if offence is taken when none is intended, what can a fellow do?" Then he says something more about having barely time to catch his train, and gets himself out of the presence of his betrothed, without further let or hindrance.

Fortunately for him he has but little time allowed him in his mother's house, before the moment arrives when they must start. "Have you made it all right with May?" Mrs. Forest asks, in a low voice. "You must tell me that, Frank. I will not be kept in the dark."

"I told her that I was obliged to go, and she turned sulky about it," he answers.

"Take your own way," his mother replies, with an angry movement of her head and hands; "take your own way—and suffer for it."

"Good-bye, mother; look after Bellairs," he says, quietly, in response. Then he adds, as unconcernedly as he can, "Where's Kate? she mustn't loiter about any longer, or she'll miss her train."

"I wish I had never seen my brother's child; I wish she had never been born," Mrs. Forest responds, bitterly.

"It's too late for that wish to be efficacious now," he laughs; "have you said good-bye to her, mother?"

"Don't let me see her again," she rejoins; and he is glad to accept her terms and get his cousin away without further intercourse with his disappointed mother.

The pair are very silent, very constrained, very awkward, as they drive down to the station. The bustle and confusion on the platform serve, for a marvel, as a sedative to both of them; and by the time they are seated in the carriage, and the train has puffed off, they are outwardly composed. For a wonder, the man is the first to speak.

"I've had a hard time of it this morning, dear," he says, bending his head nearer to her; and she replies—

"Weakness to be wrath with weakness; but I can't help feeling sure that you have stirred up strife for nothing; still—I'll never blame you."

CHAPTER IX.

DRIFTING.

MAY CONSTABLE can fume, fret, complain, threaten, without falling short, when compared with the most eloquent and most fractious of her sex. But she cannot make up her mind to do quickly a deed that is disagreeable to herself. Therefore, though she is dismally cross at home, and tearfully bitter whenever she meets the Forests—though she pours forth reproachful columns to Frank and declares every day with fresh fervour that she will “break it off,” she clings to her engagement and to the hollow mockery of Frank’s “loving her much, though he is so undemonstrative.”

His replies to her columns of tediously affectionate reproach are terse, amusing,

light-hearted, and anything but fond. He tells what views he has sketched, and what fish he has caught, and what a comfort he is to his aged and hitherto almost unknown uncle. But he refrains from all mention of Kate; and he also refrains from noticing May's leading questions as to the exact nature of his regard for herself.

Down at Dunster, meanwhile, in Kate's quiet Somersetshire home, the cousins are drifting hourly nearer and nearer to the edge of the precipice. Freed as he is now from all fear of family espionage, Frank Forest gives himself up to what he believes to be the genuine love of his life. The views are sketched, and the fish are caught, and the uncle is cultivated, in Kate's society invariably. He takes her opinion at every step of his work; he tells her of all his imaginings, all his schemes, all his professional ambitions, hopes, and fears. He kindles in response to her hearty sympathy, her cordial appreciation, her perfect comprehension of every intellectual struggle which he makes,

and triumph which he achieves. In short, he loves her as a woman, seeks her as a friend, clings to her as the brightest audience he has ever had. He contrasts her with May, until the memory of May becomes more wearisome than ever by the force of contrast. He is constantly telling himself what a brilliant Paradise life would be with the one girl, and what a dull Hades with the other. But he does not ask Kate to be his wife; nor does he tell her father anything of the state of the case, nor in any way seek to engage Kate indissolubly to himself.

In his presence, under the immediate pressure of his personal influence, Kate is perfectly satisfied that things should remain as they are. The past, the future, are as nothing to her, while, in the present, she has her lover's passionate regard. This feeling, or sentiment, on her part, undesignedly enough, puts May Constable at a farther disadvantage with Frank; for May has been in the habit of flaunting the fact of her

engagement and talking in an exhaustive manner of the domesticity of their united future, in a way that has been infinitely dreary to Frank. There is rest, zest, novelty, indescribable charm, therefore, to him in this unnamed bond which exists between Kate and himself. It is sufficiently ideal to be uncertain, sufficiently real to be exciting. What wonder that the position pleases him so well, that he likes to remain in it, and makes his answers to May's complaints as terse, amusing, and unloving as he can?

But for all her clever acceptance of the situation, for all her brilliant adornment of it, there are moments when Kate Mervyn has pangs, and acknowledges that unauthorised love is its own avenger. The morning post is her purgatory. She shivers when the unmistakable epistle is placed upon Frank's plate. It is true that Frank shows no anxiety to read it; but still he does read it eventually she knows, and she sees that it is long, and—well! Frank is too much

her own for her to find it pleasant to know that another woman addresses him as her "darling," and subscribes herself his "own loving May."

"I would do one thing or another," Kate thinks every morning. "I'd put a stop to the receipt of that twaddle, or I'd go back to the writer of it, and make an end of this idyll." But though she thinks this, she says nothing, and does nothing that may possibly induce her cousin to act as she declares she would act were she in his place.

The life at Dunster is very warm, very sunny, very sweet. Lightened by love, Frank finds it very bright. Were it unlightened by that same magic lantern, he would find it very slow. As it is, he delights in its unstrained picturesque effects, in the uneventful days, and the undisturbed repose. The Mervyn establishment is very small, very unpretending, and "very prettily managed," he thinks, as he watches Kate organising it for one brief hour after breakfast. His place during that hour, when she

is perforce absent from him, is out under a huge sweeping sombre yew tree on a little lawn. The fiercest rays can scarcely penetrate through the branches; the short elastic grass remains cool and green as if it were spring instead of midsummer. Frank, lying here at rest, with his books and papers about him, compares it with his London study in a way that is very uncomplimentary to the latter, and declares to himself that here, at length, is he surrounded by the conditions that are essential for the production on his part of worthy work.

A vision of Kate is the principal condition. Miss Mervyn has the management of a fanciful invalid father, and a couple of well-meaning but stupid servants, on a narrow income; and to her credit be it told that apparently she manages these troublesome elements with graceful ease. The pretty little thatched house is always fresh, bright, well-ordered, quiet, and fit for the reception of the most fastidious visitors. The early dinner—early on account of Mr.

Mervyn's digestion—is not a thing, even in these languid, fervid, summer days, from which one recoils. For Kate has it served in a carefully-shaded room, and decks the table and the sideboard and the mantelpiece, every available space indeed, with waving fern fronds, and all kinds of delicately-scented and delicately-tinted flowers.

It is at this early dinner that the cultivation of his knowledge of Mr. Mervyn, which is avowedly Frank's sole business here, goes on. The querulous gentlemanly invalid, who is all that remains of one of the most gallant, desperate, chivalrous naval officers of a by-gone day, comes down regularly as the dinner-bell rings, and for two hours talks to his nephew of that brave, bright, past life of his which has ended in this peaceful obscurity. The leader of a dozen cutting-out boat actions; the hero of a hundred hair-breadth adventures that covered the flag he sailed under with glory; the well-known winner of many a medal and bar of honour; he has failed to be in the

way when promotion was dealt out : so here he is, a lieutenant at the age of sixty-eight, poor, and profoundly dissatisfied. Nevertheless, dissatisfied as he is, the old glow of pride in the service is upon him still, as he relates, and Frank listens to the yarns he narrates, with the true spirit of a sailor.

In all honesty it must be confessed that, devoutly as Frank listens to these yarns, he is very glad when they are spun out, and the spinner of them retires with his newspaper and pipe and grog for his afternoon rest. For the real glory of the day commences for the cousins at this juncture : Kate is free from all household cares ; Frank has done as much “copy” as “a fellow can decently permit himself to do if he wouldn’t satiate the public,” and the coming hours are all their own in which to—fish!

The banks of the sweet shady serpentine streams that flow in and around Dunster know the pair well, as they saunter along, or sit down and whip the water with the dainty want of skill that is attributable to

the pre-occupation of their minds. The cattle on the hills, the sheep in the pastures, the birds in the trees over their heads, know her blue linen sailor's dress and his light grey costume so well that they scarcely move out of the path of the pair, who are absorbed invariably, not in silent contemplation of the bliss of being together, but in some conversation that makes each dearer to the other; for each sustains his or her respective part in it so brightly and so well.

"Do you know how long I have been here?" he asks her one day, as they rest on a stile that considerably intervenes between the meadow they are in and the meadow they want to get in. She sits on the top bar, resting her hand on his shoulder as he stands by her side, and still, in spite of her position, May is very much in the thoughts of both of them at this moment.

"A fortnight; just long enough for a shade to dim the original brightness of my

sailor suit," she answers, quickly. Then she adds, looking at him with a loving, frank glance, in which there is not a particle of reproach, "Long enough for a shade to have dimmed my conscience too, Frank. I am very happy to have you here, but do you think that my being happy makes me blind?"

"To what?"

"To the fact of your being most horribly puzzled, and a little bit nervous. Your letter this morning spoilt your breakfast; do you think I was blind to that? Why don't you go back to the writer of those letters, since you let yourself receive them at all?" she winds up suddenly, pressing her hand tightly on his shoulder, and compelling him to look at her.

"You speak coolly enough of my going back to her. It seems as if it wouldn't hurt you very much if I were cad enough to do it now," he says, in a mortified tone. He is not in the least certain as to what he shall do eventually; circumstances may

compel him to be bitterly false to the girl he loves best. But that she should show herself to be in any degree resigned to the falseness beforehand, is naturally annoying to him.

“I only ask you why you don’t do one of two things. You know well enough what it will be to me if you do the first,” she answers with a quiver in her voice, and a rush of colour over her face; “but I know what you are, Frank; I know so well, though I love you so desperately. It’s possible enough that you will do it; why check me for facing the possibility?”

“Her letters are enough to drive a fellow mad,” he says, grumblingly. “How I got into it I don’t know; and yet! the poor little thing is fond of me in her own way,” he adds, taking May’s last letter out of his pocket as he speaks.

“For my own part, I have never doubted her fondness for you,” Kate says, quietly. But the hand, which she withdraws from his shoulder now, trembles in a weak, womanly

way that makes its owner very angry with it.

“She always wants me to be with her,” Frank goes on, pursuing his own train of thought; “and when I go, she’s either silent, or talking to her mother, or saying something that I don’t care to hear.”

Kate turns her head with a gesture that makes him pause in his list of grievances, and says—

“Why don’t you take her courageously, just as she is, and confess to yourself that she is, after all, better suited to you than I am?”

“Because I should be telling myself a lie,” he says, passionately.

“I’m not sure of that, Frank; she will never grow impatient with you when you’re what you are so frequently, unstable and weak, and uncertain of yourself. She will never know how much stronger you could be if you tried; but I do know it; and I should get so impatient with you,” she says, leaping off the stile abruptly, in a paroxysm

of righteous wrathfulness, as she looks at the good material gone to waste before her.

“It’s you yourself who have made me uncertain about May, and unstable, as you call it, altogether,” he says, reproachfully. “Moreover I tell you, I’m not at all uncertain about poor little May; I’m only uncertain about the way to do it; and you must know that it’s not altogether a pleasant thing to do; but you’ll reward me for all the unpleasantness, won’t you, Kate?”

He takes her hand, and there is passion in his pressure; he looks down into her face, and there is passion in his glance. But a deadly pang of conviction that it is all evanescent—a mere flash in the pan—assails her. She knows in this moment that Frank’s love has no power of lasting. She knows that if she goes on with it she will barter her gold for dross.

A portion of the scepticism she feels on the subject sets itself in legible type upon her eyes, as he strives to look into and read them; and he reads aright, and knows that

to this woman, though she loves him, he will never be either god or hero. She will see and love him as he is—a faulty, fascinating kind of fellow, on whom she will never rely; but to whom she will be quite ready to render up her best, should he ever demand the sacrifice.

While as for May! May will always take him at his valuation of himself, as far as morals and “meaning well” go. As for the mental part of him, “she’ll have nothing to do with that, even if we do marry,” he tells himself, as he looks at Kate, and winces under, and loves her for, her power of stinging and stirring.

She has not answered his last speech as to his full belief in her ultimately rewarding him for every unpleasantness that can possibly come upon him through his rupture with May. He is not addicted to the utterance of definite statements as to his intentions concerning her; but he does like to draw out something definite from her as to her feelings regarding him. He repeats now, therefore—

“You’ll reward me for all the unpleasantness by-and-by, won’t you, Kate?”

“I shall probably be foolish enough to do whatever you ask me,” she says, carelessly. There is nothing humiliating to Kate in giving expression to this feeling which has taken possession of her. It may be blameworthy, it may be unjustifiable, it may be injurious, but, at any rate, it is genuine. She declares it, therefore, openly enough when he asks her to do it.

“I’m afraid you’re getting a great deal too fond of me, Kate,” he whispers, with sublime inconsistency; “if any hitch comes, I shall not forgive myself in a hurry.”

“Won’t you? I shall though, Frank. I risk all the evil chances of war when I enter into such an unrighteous fray as this is, and you’ll find that I shall never cry out, or blame you, or regret anything, if I get worsted.”

“Don’t talk recklessly, dear,” he says, soothingly. He can bear to tease her by putting a painful possibility before her; but

he cannot bear to hear her speak as if she had already contemplated the possibility, and made up her mind as to how she should demean herself should it ever come to pass. May, under similar circumstances, would have wept copiously upon his shoulder, and the path of duty would have been clearly mapped out for him. He would only have had to dry her tears, and tell her that he "didn't mean it," to restore his affectionate incubus to her normal condition of smiling inanity. It must be confessed that, weary as he was of her melting moods, May was easier to deal with than Kate.

"I must make it my business to see that no hitch does come," he says, presently, patting her hand, and feeling that she is really well worth taking some trouble about; "rely on me, darling, and, trust me, it will all come right."

"No, Frank, no!" she says, with a laugh that is as much at herself as at him. "I'll love you, and make a fool of myself about

you, probably ; but I am not infatuated enough to rely upon you."

"Do you care more for me than you've ever cared for any other fellow?" he asks her ; and as she answers "Yes," the sound of a footstep attracts their attention, and they look round, and see the "Cissy" of Barnes Common approaching them.

CHAPTER X.

CONVALESCENT.

FOR a week Captain Bellairs has borne the paroxysms of pain, and the pangs of mingled anxiety and curiosity, with equal fortitude. At the end of this week his fortitude gives way, and he uses the privilege of a convalescent, and will touch upon a topic that his nurses are desirous of shunning.

“Where is your cousin? Why do I never see her?” he asks of Gertrude, who is sitting near to the head of the sofa on which he is lying, with a book in her hand, from which she occasionally reads passages that goad him to madness; for, selected at random as they appear, they still seem to bear upon Gertrude’s own case with regard to himself,

which case she has during these days of suffering and intimacy made very manifest to him.

“Kate went home two days after your accident; I forgot to mention it to you; my brother went with her,” Gertrude explains hurriedly. She keeps her eyes bent upon her book, but she is conscious that a flicker of colour has crossed her cheek, and she is also conscious that Captain Belairs is watching it, and rightly divining the reason why it comes.

“You should have told me she was gone; I have been thinking her very heartless. I should have been more hurt than I should have cared to tell you if I had found that she was here indifferent about me the whole time,” he says with emphasis. “She was too kind (like you in that respect) when the smash came on Barnes Common, for me to bear patiently the idea of that kindness ceasing.”

In her innermost heart Gertrude is rather inclined to resent being coupled with her cousin Kate in this way.

“Mamma has heard from her, I haven’t had a line,” Gertrude says, “and I have no doubt but that she inquired for you ; I’ll ask mamma presently, and perhaps bring you a beautiful little message from Kate by-and-by.”

“Has Forest been down with her all this time ? ”

“It’s only a week, Captain Bellairs.”

He laughs uneasily in reply to her reproachful tone. When he thinks of good-looking, gaiety-inspiring Frank Forest alone in a dull country place with Kate Mervyn, a week seems a very long time. Unluckily for her own peace of mind, Gertrude fathoms the depths of his uneasiness, and a jealous pang robs her for a few moments of her self-possession. She has kept the conviction that Captain Bellairs feels a stronger interest in Kate than men usually feel in a mere acquaintance at bay. “Yet she is a mere acquaintance of a few hours’ standing only ; they would have mentioned it if they had ever met before,” the girl argues erroneously ;

“and I don’t believe in love at first sight; he’s only making particular inquiries about her out of idleness.”

“How does Miss Constable like his being away?” he asks, pursuing the part of the conversation that is most intensely interesting to himself.

“She makes a ridiculous fuss about it,” Gertrude answers, promptly; “she can’t bear him out of her sight. I believe she would like Frank to go about ticketed ‘engaged,’ in legible letters.”

“Is he likely to be married soon?” Captain Bellairs asks, a little anxiously. Frank, fettered by matrimonial bonds, will be a pleasant, innocuous, agreeable fellow again in the eyes of his friend, who thirsts for Mr. Forest’s blood during the present state of affairs.

“I think his meeting with our cousin will defer his marriage with May Constable indefinitely,” Gertrude says, as calmly as jealousy will permit her to say it. “He shall know the truth,” she thinks, “I don’t care whether it’s indiscreet or not.”

“You mean that he has become more deeply interested in his cousin than it is well an engaged man should be?”

“I mean that Frank and Kate have fallen in love with each other—unfortunately for him, for he will sacrifice a good deal if he marries her,” Gertrude says, with a little angry movement of the head. The fear that Captain Bellairs will think that she is speaking with an aim and object, of Kate’s “infatuation for Frank,” as she longs to call it, checks her for a few moments.

But his next remark loosens her tongue, and tips it with gall.

“He will sacrifice a great deal more if he doesn’t marry her, if she would have him,” he says, earnestly.

“She must be a more consummate flirt even than I believe her to be, if she wouldn’t have him after the way she has tried to get him away from May Constable,” she answers, with an amount of honest genuine indignation that is not called forth by any sympathy with May. It is hard on handsome

Gertrude Forest, that the pearl of her warmest affection, which she is quite ready to cast before this man, should be simply overlooked by him, while he is hankering after and seeking for the bare dead grain of interest which he strives to imagine he may make Kate feel for him.

“Then you think that she really loves your brother?” he asks, with a spasmodic movement that hurts his maimed arm horribly. He cannot help thinking of that girl who rode Guinevere from Torquay to Newton Abbott in thirty minutes for his sake, neither can he help remembering how ready she was to be entirely his own in those brighter, better, truer days. He cannot help feeling that Frank is a lesser man than himself, as far as real manliness goes—although Frank has written “Duplicity,” and he (Captain Bellairs) has only suffered from it.

“I should be obliged to have such a bad opinion of Kate, if I didn’t think that she really loved Frank,” Gertrude says, medita-

tively ; “she has gone to such lengths with him, you see,” she adds, in a burst of modest impulsiveness; and Captain Bellairs forthwith proceeds to torture himself by picturing various kinds of “lengths,” and forcing himself to gaze upon the false drawings which Gertrude is faintly outlining.

“I can’t stand this kind of thing any longer,” he says, rising impatiently, and walking up and down the room, in a way that gives Gertrude an opportunity of exhibiting a good deal of impressively tender anxiety about his injured arm. “I can’t stand this kind of thing any longer, Miss Forest; you must have seen—those few words that passed between your cousin and myself just before the spill, must have told you—that we had met, and known each other before?”

To tell the truth, Gertrude has but a very vague recollection of those words; as soon as they had been uttered, before she had been able to attach any meaning to them, she had found herself grovelling in the dust,

close to a kicking horse's heels. But as she wants to know all that is to be known, she is prudent, and refrains from saying that they have passed away from her memory, without even leaving a shadow of themselves. All she says is—

“Kate is very close about some things, very unreserved about others; she has concealed her knowledge of you, carefully; and she has shown her liking for Frank, recklessly. I don't pretend to understand her, but I like her very much—you must know that, Captain Bellairs—but I see her faults.”

“I dare say you do,” he says, “but I don't; therefore I want to stand well with her, to put myself right with her.”

“Why?” Gertrude asks sharply, and there is a twinge of jealousy, for which intuition teaches her she has good cause, in her heart as she asks it. His answer dashes all her hopes to the ground. But the hopes of a woman who is in love have a habit of getting up again.

“Why! Shall I tell you ‘why,’ Miss Forest? Yes, I think I will; because I find that I still like her better than I have ever liked any girl before or since I knew her. Meeting with her again seems to have changed my nature, and knocked the frivolity out of me in a measure.”

“You have cared for her before then, and you care for her again now, though I tell you she is in love with my brother Frank?” Gertrude interrupts bitinglly, and her hopes are held down tightly still, as he replies with a degree of genuine earnestness that is at the same time painful and pleasing to her—

“Care for her still! yes, God bless her, I care for her so much that I would do anything to further her happiness in any way; if Frank can assure it better than I can, you may quite rely on my not interfering or disturbing her at all; but if Frank keeps on his engagement with Miss Constable, I shall try my chance again.”

There is silence between them for a while

after Captain Bellairs has made this avowal. Good breeding and womanly tact are both urging Gertrude to say something that shall sound pleasantly and sympathetically in the ears of this man who is making her his confidante. But, on the other side, wounded pride and disappointed love are chaining her tongue. She positively cannot speak without the accompaniment of tears, and even in her agony she remembers man's manly dislike to being cried at.

He, meanwhile, though he appears to be absolutely unconscious of there being any disturbing element in the feeling of friendship which Gertrude Forest has developed for him lately, is perfectly alive to the nature of that feeling, and kindly desirous of crushing it out as soon as possible. He has nothing to give in return for it, consequently he does not wish to be flattered into allowing himself to be enveloped by its folds. "Surely," he tells himself, "perfect frankness on the subject of Kate will be as efficacious a curing system as I can pursue."

“I tried to get your cousin to listen to me the other day, before we went out in the tandem; but she cut me short constantly,” he says presently; “however, telling it to you will be the same as telling it to her?” he adds, inquiringly; and Gertrude feels painfully that he is putting her on her honour to repeat something which, if repeated, may incline Kate towards him.

“Perhaps, if the subject is painful, you had better not revive it,” she says, making a faint effort to avoid having the office of carrier pigeon thrust upon her.

For answer he says, “It must be revived before I can have a chance with her,” and then goes on to tell Gertrude the tale of those Torquay days in which he and Kate had met and known and loved one another.

“It’s been all plain sailing so far,” he says, as he brings his story up to the point of that ride into Newton, and Kate’s unpremeditated elopement in the train with him; “but the steering is more difficult now, for another person is involved in the interest

from this time. If I had only spoken about this person to Kate on our journey up, we should not have parted as we did at Paddington.

“Ten years ago, a very good fellow, who had been a messmate of mine for several years in different ships, wrote to me asking me to go to him at his lodgings in Portsmouth, telling me at the same time that he wanted to entrust to me a difficult and disagreeable task which he could not have entrusted to any man on earth, had there been a possibility of his living a month longer. This was the first announcement I had of his illness, and I went at once with a vow on my lips and in my heart that, let the task be what it would, I would fulfil it, for the sake of one of the best fellows in the world.

“I found him in a wretched place at Portsmouth, in the last stage of an illness that had come upon him suddenly, and that had been known to be incurable from the first. It had run its course very rapidly,

and one of its prominent characteristics was profound depression. Nevertheless, though I knew this, I was surprised to see one of the pluckiest and brightest fellows on earth so utterly broken down at the gates of death! He soon made me acquainted with the cause.

“‘You knew that I had been married and left a widower, Bellairs,’ he said, ‘but you never knew that I had a daughter; it’s about that daughter that I want to speak to you.’

“I won’t tell you all he said about what that daughter had been to him, because it would make you cry to hear it and me to tell it. He made me understand that she had been the rose of his life, the apple of his eye, and he also made me thoroughly understand that he felt he had not guarded her well. He interested me in his description of her fair sweet beauty, and her loving, tender, clinging disposition, and when he had succeeded in doing that, he told me that his daughter was lost to him, and that the task he wanted to entrust to me was this, that I

should find and save her from worse than had already befallen her.

“It was the old story, you see. A fellow had been a scoundrel to her, and the girl, unable to face it at home, had trusted the man who had already shown himself untrustworthy, and gone off with him. All this had happened only three or four months before; and the wretched father, cramped in means, physically incapacitated, and mentally broken to pieces, had been unable to trace her until just before he wrote to me. The quest he wanted me to go upon was this, that I should go to her, and, on any terms, get her to come and see him, and be blessed by him before he died.

“The girl was as happy as a bird when I found her; it’s not the slightest use my striving to cast a halo of remorse and romance about her. She was a light-headed, unobservant creature, and she had no perception of a fact that was perfectly clear to me, and that was, that the fellow was tired of her. Most men do get tired

of women who go to the deuce for them," Captain Bellairs observes, parenthetically ; "and this man was no exception to the rule.

"She was a good deal touched when I talked to her about her father. She had a timid, trusting, helpless kind of nature, and was emotional to the last degree. On the whole, she was easy to work upon ; and I got her to go away with me, she fully intending to go back again, and I as fully intending that she should never do so, if I could possibly influence her.

"To cut the story short: her father died almost immediately on her return, and poor Cissy was left upon my hands in an unexpected way. The fellow who had got tired of her wrote to her, telling her that his conscience was awakened, and that his relations were breaking their hearts on account of the 'fall he had had for her sake.' His relations were a set of uncles and aunts for whom he scarcely existed. However, the timely and thoughtful mention of them

rounded his sentence well, and made his meaning clear to her. He never knew that he nearly killed that poor girl, and drove her out of her mind for a time.

“I was true to her father’s trust in her, in one way, but hardly quite that in any other. Heaven knows, I never had another than a brother’s thought and care for poor Cissy; but I hardly quite considered what other people might think. It happened once that I took her to a little, quiet watering-place (I had no women people of my own to apply to, Miss Forest), and there were some people there who had known her father. Among them was a man called Clement Graham. She nearly went mad at the idea of their discovering anything about her, and, in a weak moment, in the midst of all manner of complications, and to stop remarks, I spoke of her as ‘Mrs. Bellairs.’ The unlucky speech cut Clement Graham off from a ferreting expedition on that occasion; but he bore it in his mind, and used it with very sad effect for me

three years after, when he met me at the Paddington station with your cousin, and desired to be kindly remembered to 'my wife.' ”

As he brings his story to a close a light comes into Gertrude's eyes, and a sense of relief into her heart. It may be that it would be doing Kate the reverse of a kindness to clear up this mystery which has kept Kate and Captain Bellairs apart heretofore. Gertrude remembers those half unconscious words he uttered on Barnes Common that day, and also recalls the pretty winning face of the woman who had turned away from his recognition. “If one rushes recklessly into a state of defiance of that sort of rivalry oneself, one has no right to persuade another into doing it,” she says, self-excusingly to herself. Then she asks aloud—

“Cissy was the name of your poor, unfortunate young friend? How funny!”

“How, funny?” he repeats, questioningly, after her.

“Because you called that pretty Mrs.

Angerstein, who came to our aid the other day, 'Cissy,' and she didn't respond. I suppose you were dreaming of the poor girl you have been telling me about?"

"I suppose I was," he says.

"Common civility must take us to Barnes Cottage as soon as you can drive out," Gertrude replies; and he immediately begins to distrust the integrity of the confidante he has chosen.

CHAPTER XI.

“IS IT THE LAST, FRANK?”

For a moment or two it goes very hard with Mrs. Angerstein inwardly as she comes upon that young pair. Outwardly she is sufficiently composed to restore their self-possession, and they are sadly in need of the restoration. Each feels the situation to be a slightly idiotic one. Each knows that the other has this feeling. Notwithstanding this, they are very firm allies as they turn and face this foe.

As for her, poor thing! she would willingly fly to the uttermost ends of the earth to evade this meeting with them. But there is no help for it. She cannot turn back and retrace her steps, for that would be pleading guilty to some nameless accusa-

tion which she feels in the atmosphere that surrounds them. She cannot advance and address them easily, for she knows that they know Harry Bellairs, and through him that they may possibly know her. Above all, she cannot stand still like a fool—naturally she must obey the instincts of a gentlewoman and make things pleasant in seeming to those about her.

"How strange, and how fortunate, that we should meet here," she begins, dashing at the difficulty of being candid and polite at the same time. "I have been so anxious to hear of your friend, and I had no opportunity of making personal inquiries, as we left town directly after the accident."

She says all this in swift unbroken tones, without let or hindrance from her audience: they are too much relieved at her taking the initiative, and giving them time to recover themselves, to check her in her opening address. By the time she has finished it, they are both standing at ease again, and are able to discourse glibly and intelligibly

about their overthrow, and Captain Bellairs's sufferings.

"Bride and bridegroom, I suppose," Mrs. Angerstein thinks, as she looks at the pair before her. "Come to spend the honeymoon in my chosen retreat. Well, if they know nothing about me, I shall find that they are better than solitude, I think."

"Are you staying here?" Mrs. Angerstein and Kate ask of each other simultaneously.

"I live here," Kate explains; "it's been my home all my life, and it's very lovely, and very dull, and I am very fond of it. If you're here for any length of time I'll teach you the country; I can teach that well, can't I, Frank?"

"I shall be charmed to learn it from you," Mrs. Angerstein says. Then a thought of Harry Bellairs crosses her mind; there is a possibility of his being here with his friends, and she leaves a road open by which to escape.

"Are you here alone?" she asks, and Kate has to reply as coolly as she can—

"My cousin, Mr. Forest, is staying with us, with my father and me. Come home with us now, and be introduced to my father, and the house, and my dog, at once, will you?"

Kate Mervyn wins every man whose path she crosses without an effort, but it is rarely that women succumb to her sway, unless she makes an effort to fascinate them. She makes the effort now; for though the old love for Captain Bellairs has been rudely handled, though it has weakened and nearly died out under the treatment; though it has, under the influence of time, got to be so feeble as to admit of a rival feeling reigning in her heart, still the girl remembers the man keenly, and yearns to pierce the mystery which severed her from him.

That this pretty, faded woman, on whose face the seal of a sad story is stamped, is the key to the puzzle, Kate is quite sure. Being sure of this, Miss Mervyn resolves to fasci-

nate the stranger into the habit of familiar intercourse, and from that vantage ground to study out the secret.

The intimacy grows vigorously with easy grace. Mrs. Angerstein in lodgings with her children, and without her husband and carriage, finds society essential to her daily well-being. She develops affection for Miss Mervyn, and allows that young lady to perceive very clearly that the state of affairs between herself and Frank is printed on an open page in legible type to Mrs. Angerstein. She is sympathetic in a soft and touching way, that lures Kate on imperceptibly to make tacit admissions which are matter of regret to her invariably afterwards. But with all this, Mrs. Angerstein guards her own secret sedulously, and Captain Bellairs's name is never mentioned between them, excepting when the daily inquiries as to his progress are made and answered.

All the uncertainty, all the humiliation, all the danger of her position, is brought

vividly before Kate one evening, when—Frank having left them for an hour's stroll with the dog and his pipe—the two ladies are alone together. They are sitting on the drawing-room window-sill, with the bright moonbeams refining their beauty, and causing everything in the room behind them, and the garden before them, to look fairer and sweeter than the fairest and sweetest things can ever look by day.

"After all, you'll be sorry to leave this—no, not sorry to leave it, but sorry you're not in it sometimes, when you think of how it is bathed in beauty to-night," Mrs. Angerstein observes presently; and Kate languidly answers unthinkingly—

"I shall only leave it in one way; and if I leave it in that way, nothing that is behind me can ever cost me a pang again."

"He's a charming fellow," Mrs. Angerstein responds. "When is it to be, dear?"

Even under the paling effect of the moonbeams Kate's face is seen to redden. It is her own fault, her own stupid, sentimental

fault, that she is put into a corner by such a question as this being asked. She has no right to resent the uncomfortable feeling by being anything but suave to her innocent questioner.

“When is ‘what’ to be? we were speaking of generalities I thought——”

“I thought we were speaking of your cousin,” Mrs. Angerstein interrupts. “I hope we shall be as friendly when you come to live in London, as we are now, Kate; and I do hope you won’t live with his people,” she goes on earnestly; “for from what he has said of his mother, she must be difficult, to say the least of it.”

Those women only who have allowed men to assume the manner which goes beyond friendship, and is not openly avowed love, will sympathize with poor Kate now. She longs to take refuge in silence, but silence will only lead Mrs. Angerstein on to say more—to say something to Frank, perhaps! As this horrible possibility arises before her, she “arms herself to bear,” and speaks.

"What a delusion you are labouring under: do you think that I am engaged to my cousin?"

"I did think so, most certainly."

"I am not—there is nothing of that kind between us: the intimacy, the familiarity, will all be easily understood by you, when I tell you that I am a girl without brothers. Naturally, I turn with affection, perhaps with a foolishly open show of it, to my nearest male relative; is it strange that I should do so?"

"Not at all," Mrs. Angerstein answers dryly. "Nor was my supposition strange or unnatural; do me the justice of admitting that. I am sorry to find that you have only a sisterly feeling for him, for, as I said just now, he's a charming fellow—perhaps, though, the sisterly feeling may deepen into something warmer."

"May deepen into something warmer!" Kate repeats, starting up with the feeling strongly upon her that "it is not worth while" for her to try and delude this woman,

who will not be deluded ; “ it has deepened into something warmer, and you know it ; but he’s engaged ! ”

“ And is sorry for it ? ”

“ And is sorry for it,” Kate acquiesces.

“ Then, my dear, he will get out of it, depend upon that,” Mrs. Angerstein says in a tone of earnest reassurance. For though she is not an observant woman, her intuitions are good, and these tell her that Frank is too weak to be strong in the right direction in a matter of this sort.

“ He will make them both suffer,” she thinks, “ and Kate will suffer after her marriage with him. However, what is the use of arguing with a woman in love ? Frank Forest is a charming fellow.”

As she meditates thus, Kate gets impatient. It seems to her she has made her confidence in vain, if Mrs. Angerstein confines herself to the bald statement of her belief in his “ getting out of it.” She—self-reliant girl as she is, on ordinary occasions—wants her friend to talk over various plans

of action now. She longs to describe May, resolving fully to describe May fairly and well. Great justice shall be done to May's mere prettiness, and to her power of being very pleasant, whenever everything is pleasant to her. But justice shall also be done to her utter inability to sympathize with a single one of Frank's intellectual tastes and higher aspirations.

"You say 'he will get out of it,' without having an idea of what the girl he is engaged to is like," she says impatiently, and Mrs. Angerstein answers—

"I can guess the type, if he has turned from her to you. She is your opposite, probably; but Kate! 'is it well to wish thee happy,' with a man who hesitates for a moment in a matter of this sort? I wish, yes, I do wish with all my heart," she goes on in a burst of enthusiastic candour, "that Captain Bellairs and you could have come together, and have cared for one another; he is such a good fellow, Kate, oh! he is such a good fellow!"

Tears come into her eyes, as she speaks. She might almost, under the influence of genuine, generous feeling, be led on to tell her story, and clear off every speck and stain from the character of this man, for a better knowledge of whom Kate is still hungering. But Frank comes back, and the moment for confidence is past, and Mrs. Angerstein, as she goes home this night, says to herself—

“Lucky for me that I didn’t; I’m glad, so glad I didn’t, for events take such strange turns, that she may marry Harry by-and-by, and know me for what I am.”

Surely her self-abasement is complete enough when she has come to this pass, that she will not further her intimacy with Kate (even for the sake of doing Kate a kindness), for fear Kate may reproach herself by-and-by for having allowed such intimacy. Her thought in this matter is not for herself. She would brave the possible scorn, she would make the revelation, she would risk the discontinuance of a friendship that is fast becoming strangely fascinating to her. But

she cannot bear to give Kate cause for conscience pricks in time to come. "Let her go on thinking that I have always been all her friend ought to be," she says to herself; "no one can make her the wiser; and just at present it would be sad to me that she should ever have a pang because of her kindness to me; if I told her all my story now, she would vibrate between gratitude to me and her worldly sense of what is right; she'd pity and condemn me, and I won't be either pitied or condemned by the only woman in the world for whose love I care, while I am with her. By-and-by, if she should hear of the curse I have been to him, and the blessing he has been to me, from Harry Bellairs, she shall be able to say to him, 'I never knew that Cissy was so bad, or I would not have had anything to do with her;' and I wonder if he will be pleased with her for saying it?"

The cousins take two or three turns round the lawn this evening after Mrs. Angerstein's departure, before either can think of any-

thing that needs actually to be said. Frank at last feels that his soul will be lighter when he has disburdened it of a certain vague weight that is oppressing it; hers may be heavier for the speech, but we can't have everything in this world.

"I don't quite like that woman, Kate; I think she's trying to ferret out something about us, don't you?"

"I think that she thinks we are a brace of fools," Kate answers; and Frank chimes in impatiently—

"That's the worst of it; you women never will befriend yourselves, nor let us befriend you; you go and make a display of something, before there's anything to display, and so precipitate matters, and bring them to smash as a rule, and all because of the impatience of your spirits, and the poverty of your reasoning powers. Why, why on earth make a parade of the feeling that we entertain for each other, in order that Mrs. Angerstein may vivisect it?"

"What have I done that you have not

done?" she asks. "Have I been more imprudent, more demonstrative, more regardless of the claims of others? No, Frank, I have been none of these things; but I have been more truthful, and I have loved you better than you have loved me; let us have done with it. Let us make an end of it, let us live it down."

"Oh! don't say that," he says, quickly.

"Don't say what? We can make an end of it, we can live it down, we can crush it out of our hearts, if we do it at once, now, quickly."

"You may be able to do so," he says, "but I couldn't cast away all feeling for a kitten for which I had cared, in such a hurry."

"Your present task is easier, I am only a woman."

"That's too much like a line in one of my own pieces for me to be touched by it," he says, looking down at her, and speaking with a sort of mirthful sadness that is infinitely perplexing to her; "but I'm cut up about

you, Kate, my pet ; you're taking it all so much more to heart than I thought you would." Has she been the sport and pastime of an idle man again ? Her eyes ask the question which her lips refuse to utter, as they stand there in the stillness, with the moon casting its rays down upon them.

"I don't mean that," he says, answering some subtle meaning in her glance which she had hardly intended to convey to him ; "but you can't stand the uncertainty, even for my sake."

"You tell me that there is uncertainty about it still ? Oh ! Frank, you should have respected both Miss Constable and myself more than to play such a shallow part ; I won't let you degrade yourself so any longer," she continues impetuously ; "you shall not be in 'uncertainty' any more, as far as I am concerned ; we'll be friends, cousins, nothing more from this moment, Frank :" and as she speaks she lifts her anguished face to his, offering him her lips as a sister might.

He has every intention of breaking with May, and he has not the slightest intention of parting with Kate. Nevertheless, now, when she speaks in this way, and looks in this way, the man is as miserable as if, indeed, he were assisting at the last obsequies of the love that exists between his cousin and himself.

"One last kiss, at any rate," he says brokenly; and, like a woman, she draws her head back, looks him tenderly in the face, and asks—

"Is it the last, Frank? can you say it shall be the last?"

"I'll never give you up," he whispers; "you're part of my life, Kate—the knowledge I have of you has changed my nature; but you mustn't try and force me to make a show of my feelings."

"I would despise myself if I could do it," she interrupts; "if I am so little to you that you can conceal them for convenience sake, we had better make an end of this indeed."

“It’s just the same with May,” he says, complainingly, never considering how this comparing her with May chafes the spirit of the girl he is addressing; “she always complains that I don’t devote myself to her enough when we’re out together; she would have me cut other people, and sit by her all the time, though she has nothing to say for herself when I am there.”

The vein of humour which runs through his account of what his proprietress would have him do, strikes a corresponding vein in Kate’s nature, and she laughs lightly and heartily, and all the agony is eliminated from the situation. With the agony, their resolution to make this “their parting hour, a madness of farewells,” takes wings also; and when they go in after a time, they are more firmly attached to each other than they have ever been.

It happens unfortunately that by reason of their having lingered so long in the garden Mr. Mervyn has suffered from the breach of certain observances which habit has made

second nature. The laws even of second nature cannot be roughly violated without unpleasant consequences ensuing. This night they have been roughly violated indeed. The water wherewith Mr. Mervyn's glass of grog was made had not boiled. The window had been left open too long, and he had caught a slight cold. The housemaid had mislaid a magazine he was interested in, and his daughter was not by to find it. Small wonder that he should suddenly disapprove of these "midnight rambles" as he called them in his discomfort and anger, or that he should tell Frank surlily, when that offender did appear, that he "must have a word with him to-morrow."

CHAPTER XII.

DO AS YOU LIKE.

FRANK'S feelings, as he loiters about this morning, trying to cheat himself and Kate into the belief that he is not keenly anxious and excessively uncomfortable, are unenviable to the last degree. He knows perfectly well from the manner and the tone which his uncle assumed towards him last night that some definite statement as to his designs or his want of them, will be extracted from him this morning. He also knows perfectly well that he is utterly unprepared with such a statement. He will be compelled to interlard his discourse with "ifs," and it strikes him forcibly that Mr. Mervyn is not the man to listen tolerantly to any exposition of a halting or dubious policy. Under these circumstances

it is not at all extraordinary that he should feel inclined to charge Kate with being altogether too precipitate, not to say reckless, in the matter.

He makes, as the moment for his interview with his uncle approaches, one futile effort to take counsel with Kate as to the course he shall adopt.

"Do exactly as you like," is Kate's answer.

"That's exactly what I can't do ; I can't ask Uncle Frank to smile benignly on my engagement with May and my love for you at the same time."

"No ! you only ask me to do that."

"Play fair, Kate dear ; circumstances set the trap for us, and we fell into it simultaneously. Neither can blame the other : I only want your advice now as to the best and happiest way for us both to get out of it."

"Do as you like," Kate repeats, hardening and strengthening her heart as she witnesses his weakening resolution. "I wouldn't move

a hair's-breadth to avert the end, even if I felt that it would kill me, and I don't feel that." Then a pang of bitter, tender regret that she may not go on loving this man, and striving to bring out what is best in him, assails her, and she goes away from him to endure the agony of the first act of renunciation alone.

A night's repose has toned down the warmth of Mr. Mervyn's feelings considerably. He has forgotten the mislaid magazine, and the lukewarm grog, therefore the spirit of the housemaid is at peace. But he has not forgotten that his only daughter and his nephew are absorbing each other in a way that not even their kinship warrants. Accordingly, though he is very cordial in his manner to Frank this morning, Frank feels desperately that the time has come.

He is disgusted with himself to find that he is actually relieved when his uncle, far from asking him his intentions, quietly takes it for granted that he has none; and merely suggests that it is quite time that there

should be an end to an intimacy that may be remarked as excessive, and may be detrimental. "Besides, my boy," Mr. Mervyn goes on: "it's time that you went back to this young lady you're going to marry. Your mother tells me that she is a very lovely and attractive girl, and it's not fair to her to subject her to the temptation of other men's attentions when they are unchecked by your presence."

The old sailor makes his speech in the frankest and friendliest way—in a way that prevents Frank exhibiting the rage he feels at his mother having interfered a second time between himself and Kate. It goads him nearly to madness to hear the loveliness and attractiveness of his May held out as reasons why he should return to her, and leave Kate. But his tongue is tied. He cannot deny his engagement; he cannot defend his conduct; he cannot express a single sentiment about Kate which would not be an insult to her father under the circumstances. All he can do is to an-

nounce his readiness to go home, "if his uncle is tired of him."

"I'm not tired of you, but we don't want any deserters here, my boy," Mr. Mervyn tells him good-temperedly. "There now! I promised your mother that I would speak about it, and I have done it. Send Kate here: I want her to get me something."

"Your father has turned me out," Frank says gloomily to Kate as he meets her. "He wants you now—to tell you the reason why, I suppose, and to hear you say that you think it's all right, and that you're perfectly satisfied that it should be so. Kate! I don't deserve anything better than this, but I am worthy of something better. If only you get below the surface, you might make a good fellow of me; but if you give me up in this way, it will be giving me up to May—it will be giving me up to a careless, purposeless life."

She shakes her head in helpless despair, for she knows very well now that all the meaning of his plea falls far short of her

hopes. He wants her to love him still, and not only to love him still, but to show him her love, to try and detain him near her, to strive to detach him from May, to soothe her father's doubts, and stifle his rebukes. All these things she fully understands, now that he wishes her to do so. But she also fully understands that he will remain passive himself, that he will continue to wait on aimlessly for something to occur to facilitate the breaking off of his engagement with May; and that she is, in fact, wasting her love on a man who is consistent in nothing but his inconsistency, and strong in nothing but his weakness of will.

"It rests with you, Frank, whether you go from me or stay with me," she tells him; "it is altogether beyond my control."

"After what your father has said I can't stay here unless you explain things and smooth them over."

"That I will not do, even for you."

"Then I must go and face the fate you force upon me."

“You will do whatever is easiest and pleasantest to you at the moment,” she says, sorrowfully; “and you’ll love your work, and—together you will be very much happier than I shall be, Frank.”

“I don’t know about that; you will not have to pass the rest of your days with May,” he answers, discontentedly, as she goes away to her father, and he feels quite in the position of the wronged one, and asks himself, “What on earth women want?—They’re not satisfied with the knowledge that a fellow loves them, they want to have the fact blazoned abroad; there’s really no pleasing them; if a fellow tries to do it he only gets into a scrape for his pains.”

The truth is that the prospect of a return to May is very horrible to him. He realizes with painful force that if he once puts the yoke of her presence and the family pressure upon himself again, he will never be able to shake it off. If his uncle had not been so precipitate, if his mother had not interfered, if Kate herself had only played

her part more patiently, he would have spared poor May the misery of making a loveless marriage. As it is, "They've tied my hands between them," he says savagely, as his heart falls down before the vision he has conjured up of the arid plain life will be to him, with May Constable for his wife.

There is something, he feels, desperately undignified in the situation during the whole of the day. Kate absolutely refuses to make a sign of affection for him from the moment he declares himself compelled to go and "face the fate she has forced upon him;" and his uncle considerately and cheerily makes his engagement the topic of conversation whenever the exigencies of social life compel them to meet.

The mere mention of it makes him shiver. How then shall he endure the renewal of the daily intercourse with May, which May insists upon when he is in London, as one of her just prerogatives? As he has observed in a moment of unwise confidence to Kate, "she expects one to go and sit by her, and

she has nothing to say, and even that she doesn't say well." Poor fellow! his future looms before him a very flat plain indeed, as he remembers all these things.

But he receives no further encouragement from Kate to prove himself a renegade to May. Miss Mervyn does not go on her way rejoicing exactly; but she goes on her way, while he remains with them, with an air of contentment that is infinitely irritating to him. He cannot make up his mind to be everything to her; but, on the other hand, he cannot make up his mind to be nothing to her. "Women either draw the line too broadly, or refuse to draw it at all," he tells himself. It must be admitted that there is truth in his statement.

She, meanwhile, has a hard part to play. She has conceived it, and all the difficulties it presents most thoroughly, and is prepared to throw her whole heart and spirit into it, and render it full justice. Frank is unstable as water, and her life's happiness will be wrecked, if she suffers herself to be wafted

about wheresoever his whim listeth any longer.

“ ‘To seem’ will soon be transformed into ‘to be,’ in my case,” she tells herself, as she finds the part she has determined to play becoming easier to her every hour. It had been hard at first—torturingly hard—to turn from him when he tried to wake her pity and her love. But, before this day is over, the task of denial has become easier to her; and even May might have witnessed, without a pang of jealousy, the parting scene.

“ Give me one kiss, Kate, as you send me away; at least, as you let me go in this way, I’ll never ask you for another,” he says. His face changes, and his tongue falters: for though he dare not be free to win her, Kate is dearer to him than any other woman ever has been or ever will be. “ Give me one kiss; I must have it. I will have it—my darling! oh, my darling!”

She puts her cheek up to him, and it does not quiver as his lips touch it. Her eyes

meet his steadily, and she marvels at herself that it is so.

“Can you forget all this?” he mutters. “Can you put away the memory of the way we have loved each other? Can you take up your life from this point, and go on with it as if I had never existed?”

“Yes, to your last question,” the girl says, sadly; “I know myself so well, Frank; I feel that I shall be able to force myself, not to ‘forget’ you, but to take a powerful and absorbing interest in something, it may be in work of some kind, or, it may even be, in another love. I can’t tell which it will be, but I know that it will be.”

“Not in another love,” he pleads. He is renouncing her himself, but he cannot bear the idea of a rival and successor. He cannot endure the candour with which Kate makes the statement, and withal he cannot shake off a feeling of half remorse. It is love for himself—love which he has cherished and accepted, and fed with caresses, and which he is now going to leave to starve—

which has brought Kate to this hard philosophic state.

“Not in another love,” he repeats, ardently, as Kate stands coldly by, like a statue of herself, and makes no reply to his request, no response to the hand-clasp which he gives her, by way of adding weight to his entreaty. She trembles for an instant as she feels that if she relaxes in the least now, all her resolves will be broken down, and she will relapse into a state of supine devotion to him again. So, with the iron entering into her soul, she compels herself to say—

“Why should you care, Frank? Why can’t you be as indifferent to me as I shall be to you from this hour? You have loved me less than I have loved you, and still you’d grudge me to any one else, while I could hear of your marriage to-morrow without wincing.”

He winces enough as he listens to her steadily spoken words, for he believes them to be true, and Kate goes on—

“I shall follow your career with interest,

I shall read of your successes with pride ; I shall always look upon the period of my intercourse with you as the brightest part of my life ; but," (and she shivers with the earnestness with which she says this) " I'll kill every softer thought of you from this moment, and stifle every indication of such softer thoughts ever having existed."

" It makes me sadder than anything ever made me in my life before," he says, though he feels how utterly futile it is of him to say anything, since he can do nothing ; and Kate smiles a weary, cynical smile, as she answers—

" Sadness and you will never keep company together for long, Frank. Honestly, I am happy in feeling sure of this, that you will find balm in every direction for every transient annoyance."

" I shall never find balm for the wound your words inflict," he interrupts ; " they'll sting and make me ache till the day of my death."

Perhaps he suffers more on account of all

this during the course of his journey back to town, than he ever has before, or will ever again. As soon as he is away from the numbing influence of the change which has come over Kate, he understands that she has been playing a part, and he realizes with sorrow how stricken the girl must have been before she could descend to such depths of duplicity for the sake of deceiving him. As soon as he is away from her, too, he realizes how greatly she has added to the charm existence has for him, and how inefficiently May will supply the vacuum Kate has made in his life.

The reception he meets with from his family is not one calculated to make him feel better satisfied with things as they are. His mother and sister Marian are going out to dinner, and Mrs. Forest feels justly aggrieved that a man who comes home without giving a note of warning of his approach, should expect anything better than a chop. "At any other time Frank would go to his club without a word,"

Gertrude grumbles ; "it is too much that he should stay at home and be dismal to-night." The wrong is felt to be a specially grievous one by poor Gertrude, for she had anticipated a quiet evening with Captain Bellairs, who, tamed by suffering, has come to the pass of being able to listen to Gertrude's rendering of Elaine's infatuation for Lancelot and Guinevere's indignation about the same, whenever they get an hour or two alone.

"You really ought to go and see May," Gertrude urges. "If she finds you have been here all this evening, she will be so disagreeable to us. Really, Frank, it is a little hard that we should have to keep the peace with the whole Constable family for you, and make love to May for you while you're away."

"You'd rather make love to some one else for yourself, wouldn't you?" Frank laughs. "Well, dear, don't mind me ; read away at him if you like, not but what a quiet smoke and chat with me would do him a great deal more good."

“I don’t ask you what has happened down at Dunster to send you home in such a hurry,” Gertrude retorts; “but if you are still engaged to May, you ought to go there to-night.”

In reply to this Frank whistles, and Gertrude has the agonizing conviction thrust upon her, that Frank is not only going to stay in and fetter her to-night, but that Kate is still free to attract Captain Bellairs.

Frank suffers for his obstinacy in remaining at home, however. The trio are not at all at ease from the first, and when the names of Mrs. Angerstein and Kate come to be mentioned, and it is understood that these two ladies are together at Dunster, and are already intimate, additional embarrassment sets in.

“You seemed to know that pretty woman when you recovered consciousness that day,” Frank says, unsuspectingly; “but I suppose you were dazed or dreaming, for we spoke of you many times, and she would have said so if she had known you.”

“A fellow is apt to ramble when he has had such a blow on the head as I had that day,” Captain Bellairs replies, and he repents him of that confidence he has made to Gertrude, who is evidently employing herself in putting two and two together. Poor Cissy’s secret is too sad a one for any one to tell it but herself, and his unguarded exclamation may have given the clue to poor Cissy being well reputed Mrs. Angerstein. “But if she will only confide in Kate, Kate is just the girl to stick to her for ever,” he tells himself; and then he goes on to ask leading questions concerning the extent of the intimacy which exists between these two women in whom he is so deeply interested.

“Mrs. Angerstein, from what you tell me of her, must be a decided acquisition to the society of a small country place. Does Miss Mervyn see much of her?”

“They’re together morning, noon, and night,” Frank replies.

“Kate is just the girl to hurl herself

into a thing of the sort, without introductions or common discretion," Gertrude puts in, elevating her head. "Mrs. Angerstein may not be at all a proper person to know, for all she knows to the contrary. I hope Kate won't insist upon our being bosom friends with her, before we know a little more about her."

"Your prudent sentiments do you much honour," Captain Bellairs says; and Gertrude feels that she has made a false move, though she cannot tell in which direction.

CHAPTER XIII.

“IT’S ALL UPHILL WORK.”

“AND so the gnome died, and his beautiful mortal wife was left free to love and to marry whom she would. But just as her freedom came to her, the one who had loved and been loved by her so long, looked behind him and saw and loved, and woo’d and wed, some fairer lady.”

“What a horrible ending to a fairy story,” Kate Mervyn says discontentedly, as she brings to a conclusion the reading of the fairy tale with which she has beguiled the hour of halt on Countesbury Hill.

“The worst of it is the gnomes of real life never die, until the ones to whom their decease would bring freedom are past caring for it,” her companion rejoins, with a sigh.

"Oh, Kate! where do you get your contentedness and forgetfulness? That charming cousin of yours has not been gone a week yet, and you seem to have wiped him away from your memory; and Countesbury Hill doesn't tire you to death."

The last speaker is Mrs. Angerstein, who has moved herself and children to Lynmouth, and induced Kate Mervyn to be her guest for a week. Three days of the week have expired, as they sit now on steep Countesbury Hill. Odd as it may appear, the intimacy between the two women has received no check as yet, although they have been thrown entirely upon one another's society, without the alleviation of a third person's presence.

Nevertheless, though the intimacy has progressed favourably, they have not made any confidences to each other. Perhaps it is for this very reason that they still regard each other well. Kate's silent battle with herself against her own judgment, tastes, heart, and tact—against her memories—

against her sense of justice and of right—has been a bitterly sharp one. “This good is in it, whatsoe’er of ill,” it has been “silent!” She has not made her plaint aloud, she has not worn her heart upon her sleeve, to be an annoyance to everybody about her. Indeed, she has so thoroughly thrown herself into the part which fate, circumstances, and Frank have forced upon her, that she is almost convinced that she is the cold and callous woman she pretends to be.

But though they have not made any confidences, Mrs. Angerstein has surmised, and implied, and insinuated a great number of things concerning the relations which may possibly exist between Kate and Frank. These surmises, implications, and insinuations have been met and parried gracefully and well. At the same time they have given Kate a good deal of pain which cannot be defined, and caused her to feel a vast amount of rage which may not be exhibited. The necessity for keeping this latter evil

spirit quiet, is the cause of her having lapsed into the reading aloud of light literature, while they have been resting by the wayside before turning homewards this evening.

"Anything," Kate says to herself, "is better than being the target for those arrows of worded wonder which she shoots at me as to my impassibility concerning Frank; when she tells me that I 'seem to have wiped him away from my memory,' I feel that I have indeed discovered an apparent eraser for all these blots of genuine feeling, but—they're there still, and I feel them corroding my peace of mind."

Mrs. Angerstein's words come in trippingly at the end of these thoughts.

"The idea of your cousin being married soon is a nightmare to me; I can't shake it off."

"Nor can I," Kate says; "I shall have to get such a quantity of new things for the wedding; and everything is dear now, and everything white is dearer than all else. May—who is purity personified—will have

this to answer for: she will make me a bankrupt."

"She will," Mrs. Angerstein says, concisely.

"Fancy going headlong to ruin for the sake of white silk and tulle," poor Kate says, with a struggle to be humorous that is very gallant, considering she is at the moment wincing under the influence of the vision she has conjured up, of the scene when that white silk and tulle will be worn.

"It's just as sensible a thing as going headlong to ruin for the sake of a man," Mrs. Angerstein responds, in a little burst of miserable retrospective feeling. "Come, Kate! it will be ever so late before we get back to Lynmouth; besides, if we sit still any longer in this pure, free air, I shall be lured on to tell you something about myself that I would rather you didn't know."

"I'll promise not to try and lure you on to make any indiscreet confidences," Kate says, laughingly. "I am not very curious about people's pasts; I daresay your life has

been a little more eventful than my own, for it has been a longer one."

The idle words, the careless, unintentional allusion to her seniority, stab Mrs. Angerstein sharply. It is in the nature of some women to love "gay youth" in their women friends, and still to feel outraged if the said friends betray anything like consciousness of the mere unassailable fact of being younger.

"As to my life having been longer than yours, that has nothing to do with it," Mrs. Angerstein says, a trifle testily; "long before I was your age, when I was quite young indeed, I had gone through such misery, and excitement, and despair, as was enough to make any girl prematurely old." Then she checks herself, fearing that she may let her story slip out of her own safe keeping, and still longing with woman's perversity to tell it.

But though she feels intuitively that Kate is not a girl to sit in the seat of the scornful, because she has been out of the way of temptation herself: though womanly instinct

tells Mrs. Angerstein that this newly made friend of hers is the last person in the world to throw stones, Kate's power of preserving a confidence is not taxed this day. Some fine subtle feeling restrains the woman who is yearning for the full friendship that only full confidence can create from opening her heart to Kate Mervyn. Mrs. Angerstein cannot define the feeling herself, but it shall be defined for her. It is the dread of rivalry existing between them in the future. She knows not about whom, since she is a married woman, and may not even ask herself the question. But though she clings to Kate's companionship in the present, her prophetic soul tells her that she will repent her for so doing in the future.

Suddenly (by what train of thought she has arrived at the junction of conjectures which induce her to speak so, it is impossible to determine) she says—

“May I ask if you have known Captain Bellairs long?”

“My cousins have known him for a long

time, I believe, and known him rather intimately too," Kate says, evasively ; but when a woman is bent upon knowing from another woman something of the man who is dear to one, and possibly may be dear to both, evasion is a very feeble weapon to employ.

"I said have *you* known him long?" Mrs. Angerstein repeats. "I don't know your cousins, therefore I'm not interested in them, or their friends ; but I do know you, dear, don't I ? and knowing you, of course I am interested in all that concerns you."

"Captain Bellairs does not concern me at all," Kate says quietly ; "he did while he was in danger, but Gertrude tells me he is nearly well again, and talking of leaving them, 'just as they are getting accustomed to the unaccustomed position of having to think more of some one else than they do of themselves,' as she expresses it."

They are coming down the hill at a good pace as they converse in this way. The decline into Lynmouth is a steep one, the impetus grows stronger every moment, and

they are walking almost too fast to talk, as Kate says this. But Mrs. Angerstein has no intention of allowing the pace to interfere with her pursuit of information.

“We shall get home before moonlight, after all,” she says, pulling up, and putting her hand on her side; “and I came out for the express purpose of going back into the village by moonlight; we haven’t come down into Lynmouth by moonlight yet; any change is pleasant.”

“You expect Mr. Angerstein, to-morrow, don’t you?” Kate asks; and something in the question grates on Mrs. Angerstein.

“Yes, I expect him to-morrow, and I shall be very glad to see him; but I was speaking of the pleasantness of ‘change,’ Kate. I have been seeing him for seven years, he’s part of my life; there is not much variety in the social intercourse between husband and wife.”

Kate is silent, not because she dissents from anything that Mrs. Angerstein has said, but because she is pondering over the

possibility of her ever finding it monotonous to hold daily intercourse with Frank. "No," she finally decides, "it wouldn't be monotonous; but it would be maddening to any nature less lymphatic than May's. I can only feel pain about losing him now. If we had married, it might be that I should feel pain about having gained him."

They are down in Lynmouth by this time, rounding the corner by the chief inn of the place, and, just at the moment they do so, a dog-cart is pulled up at the door. The driver of the dog-cart is about to descend leisurely, when he catches sight of the two ladies; then he jumps down, regardless of the way he jars his frame, which is weak and shaken still, and advances to meet the astonished pair, with the words—

"Cissy and Kate together! The pleasantest sight that has greeted my eyes for years." Captain Bellairs says this, coming to meet them with a glow of unpremeditated warmth and welcome upon him that quite takes the chill off their manner. He

makes himself one of the party, assuming that they are intimate with each other, and ready to be intimate with him again, in a way that cannot be gainsaid.

Not that they desire to gainsay it; they are each so sadly glad that he has brought himself to the fore again. They are each so keenly anxious to find out how much the other knows about him.

“Is it accident or design that has brought him to meet her?” each woman asks this question of herself and fails to answer it to herself satisfactorily. Each, for duty’s sake, tries to hope it is by accident; and both are largely-enough endowed with fond, vain, womanly feeling to be very glad to think that it is by design. For one of them has suffered for him, and the other one is well aware that he has suffered greatly through her. One reason is almost as strong as the other in interesting them most keenly about him now.

“I left your aunt and cousins quite well this morning, Miss Mervyn,” he says directly

to Kate. "They would have charged me with kind messages to you, of course, only they didn't happen to know that I should see you so soon."

"Didn't you tell them where you were coming?" Kate interrupts.

"I told them that, to be sure; but Lynmouth is not Dunster, you see. I should have been over to Dunster, in any event, in a day or two," he adds, in a lower voice; "for I have so much to tell you about the kindness I have received from each member of your family, that I feel I can't tell it to you soon enough."

All this while poor Mrs. Angerstein has been seething in silent wrath, under her mistaken sense of being neglected. She has grieved, wearied, troubled, infinitely distressed this man. For the very reason that she has done all these things, she feels that she is much nearer to him than Kate Mervyn can ever be; and that therefore Kate Mervyn has no manner of right to monopolise his first attention. It had been all very well

for her to tell herself, when he was not here, that she wished Kate and Harry Bellairs could come together, and learn to love one another. Now that she sees them together, now that she hears him address Miss Mervyn as "Kate," she does not like the possible vista that opens before her. He is not a man to be unduly familiar. Therefore, his calling Kate by her Christian name is a certificate as to the fact of his having had a much fuller knowledge of her in days gone by than Miss Mervyn has ever admitted to Mrs. Angerstein.

"Won't you come home with us to supper, and tell Miss Mervyn something more about her aunt and cousins?" Mrs. Angerstein says; and Kate takes advantage of his acceptance of the invitation to say—

"Let me go on before you, Mrs. Angerstein, and cater for the unexpected guest. We are obliged to bring a good deal of mind to bear upon the matter of provisioning our little camp, Captain Bellairs, otherwise we

may find ourselves left alone in Lynmouth with half a lobster, and the knowledge that we can get nothing more until the market-women come down the following morning."

"I never manage so badly as that ; after seven years of housekeeping that would be to put out signals of utter incapacity," Mrs. Angerstein explains rather touchily to Bel-lairs, as Kate walks off. The truth is, the poor woman is agitated by this *rencontre*. Her life stream has run along through such quiet pastures for many years, that now, when it seems to be widening, and rushing with a certain amount of velocity into wilder places, she begins to feel alarmed. In the first whirl of novel and excited feeling she is rather inclined to look back upon that peaceful past of hers as flat, tame, and un-profitable ; rather inclined to forget for a brief space that she has been very happy and contented in it, although one day so closely resembled another that, at the end of the week, she had frequently found it difficult to distinguish between them. The

shadow of an old romance is falling across her path again. This man by her side has been a hero to her from the day her father died, when in her desolation and shame she turned to him, and found him ready to give her a brother's love and a brother's protection. That another feeling than the fraternal one soon took possession of her heart, is a miserable fact that she never suffered any other human being to suspect—that she strove to conceal from herself—that she eventually strove to eradicate by marrying a man who knew all her story, and trusted her in spite of it. Now, as she meets Belairs again, all her weak, wavering nature is shaken, all the peaceful plan of her married life seems marred. She feels almost guilty of treachery towards this true friend of hers, as she meets his steady, honest gaze, and knows that her own heart has known many a tumult of passion on his account. Bitter jealousy, of which she is heartily ashamed, flushes her cheeks, as he makes frank mention of Kate Mervyn and of his

warm admiration. She is mean enough, she acknowledges to herself, to be ready to do anything to keep these two, who are so well suited to each other, apart. She shrinks, like the moral coward she is, from the prospect of witnessing the growth of an attachment on his side, which every law of reason and of right, of nature and of circumstance, will justify. She shrinks almost as pitifully from the thought of telling him about her own marriage, and from offering him explanations of certain portions of her conduct which must have strongly resembled ingratitude in his eyes. Above all, she shrinks from the idea that now Kate may learn the old story from the lips of Harry Bellairs, and possibly teach Harry Bellairs to stand apart from her for the rest of his life.

"It is such uphill work, getting out of this stifling place, in any one direction," he says, looking around him, as they saunter slowly in the direction of her lodgings. "I wonder you don't prefer Lynton ; it's fresher up there."

"It's all uphill work, getting along in life at all, I think," she answers, with quivering lips. "Oh, Harry, I did hope, when I left the home you put me in, and I married Mr. Angerstein, that there was an end of all trouble about me, as far as you were concerned. Now our paths have crossed again, and I have a presentiment that I shall be a source of distress to you."

"Fatigue has made you morbid," he says, kindly. "Come on and give me the supper you promised me, and show me your children, and introduce me to your husband."

"He is not here."

"Not here: I'm sorry for that," he says, with sudden gravity. For he feels that his former relations with these ladies precludes all possibility of intimacy with them, while the married one is unprotected by the presence of her husband. But his last words find no echo in Cissy's heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

GENTLE WORDS !

“ ‘ SOME days must be dark and dreary,’ we are told on the incontrovertible authority of Longfellow, but he wouldn’t have rhymed about the fact so resignedly if he had tried a few such days with May,” Frank Forest says to himself, one morning, when he finds himself sitting alone with his betrothed.

A light drizzling rain is falling, the sun is not making the faintest effort to appear, and altogether there is that uncomfortable unseasonableness in the atmosphere which surely depresses the man, woman, or child who is compelled to pass the hours in idleness. Unhappily for himself, Frank has been betrayed into pledging himself so to pass them. It is the day after his return

from Dunster, and in brave but blind obedience to the dictates of duty, he has put himself into the power of May at a comparatively early hour of the day.

A sense of her wrongs is paramount in May's mind, and to the best of her ability she is making it very manifest in her manner. Unfortunately for her, she has no definite accusation to bring against her recreant lover. He has been away from her nearly a month, but he avows that he has been away on family business, and she cannot gainsay him. During his absence he has written to her regularly—that is to say, he has always answered her letters, and though his epistles have not been charged with ardent expressions of affection, they have been sensible and kind—a little too sensible, perhaps. Lastly, he has come to see her shortly after his return, not in indecorous haste, certainly, but soon enough to show that he is her own property still, and that he has not fallen a prey to the wiles of that “artful girl.”

In spite of her inability to frame a strong act of accusation against him, May expresses her resentment in every look and gesture. Nevertheless, full of resentment as she is, she claims her pound of flesh, and will have him engage himself to sit with her this morning, to drive with her mother and herself in the afternoon, and to dine with them at night. Crushed and tamed by a consciousness of the decrepit way in which he has broken down, Frank yields a meek assent to these plans, and sits with her, his heart heavy, his mind empty, and his "brain softening," he almost fancies, - from a prolonged contemplation of May's white expressionless hands, as they move about listlessly, engaged in the production of some new lace stitches.

It is no part of Miss Constable's scheme to try and beguile the time for him. He has erred in her estimation, and he must be punished by a show of her displeasure. As the captive of her bow and spear he shall remain close to her, but she feels vaguely

that it is only just to let him see that she doesn't want his society.

Frank has tried many topics in turn, and each one has turned to ashes on his lips, by reason of the terseness—not to say snappish conciseness—of May's rejoinders. He has spoken of his work and his sisters, and his friend Bellairs; and to all of these subjects May has shown indifference. He has maligned the weather and the daily papers, and "everything" that is "going on," and May has consistently professed herself pleased and satisfied with them all. He has even for the sake of the experiment attempted to caress May into a milder mood, and May has pettishly repulsed his not very ardent demonstration. Under these circumstances it is not wonderful that he should feel considerably depressed by the knowledge that he has to spend nearly the whole of the day in her society.

After a silence that has lasted about three minutes, May looks up at him with a heightened colour and a slight waving of

the head that betokens anger, and says, "You must have been a pleasant companion for your uncle and cousin, if you entertained them by your conversation as brilliantly as you are entertaining me this morning."

The idea of May being "entertained" by any conversation, however brilliant, tickles him considerably, consequently he further annoys his already outraged liege lady by laughing, as he replies—

"You won't throw the ball back, May; it's too much trouble for me to run after it each time."

"Too much trouble to exert yourself the least bit in the world for my entertainment; oh! Frank! what a prospect for us; when we are married we shall probably have to spend many, many such days as this ——"

"Heaven forbid," he interrupts. "My dear child, why conjure up such an appalling possibility? There is always the chance of a wet day certainly, but you can't often be so thoroughly out of gear as you are to-day."

"You mean that I am exacting and ill-tempered?" she asks in a subdued but very visible fury.

"I mean that you are exacting—all nice women are," he says, hurriedly, hoping to avert the storm; "every lady would be queen for life, you know."

"You meant more than that, because that wouldn't be being 'out of gear' in your estimation," she says, her voice getting shriller with each word she utters. "It's all very well for you to try and make it smooth with me, by repeating, parrot-like, a compliment that you have probably often addressed to your cousin: but I'm not so easily deceived as you seem to think, Frank; and I am not so entirely dependent on you for affection and attention as you seem to suppose."

She pauses, out of breath with indignation and jealousy, and Frank more than ever dislikes the prospect of connubial bliss that is opening before him, as he looks at her.

"I never supposed you were dependant

on me entirely for affection and attention, May," he says, softly, for he is a very good-natured fellow, and he really pities the girl for the pangs he unavoidably inflicts upon her. Mentally, he adds, "It would be a bad look-out for you if you were, poor little thing, for I have very little of either to bestow upon you."

"I am sure I never did a single thing to try and make you propose to me," May goes on, tearfully; "and why you did it I can't tell, for you're showing plainly enough that you don't want me now; I wish you'd say what you do want, and make an end of it."

She winds up her sentence with a jerk. She is evidently in the very worst and weakest stage of feminine fury, and Frank sees how unbecoming it all is, although he cannot blind himself to the fact of its having some foundation.

"I think the less one wrangles the better," he says, trying to speak calmly; "hard words break no bones, the old saw tells us, but they live in the memory, and they're not

pleasant companions. I don't want to be tempted into saying anything impatient or rude to you, May, dear. I should resent it on myself, for your sake, by-and-by, if I could ever forget myself so far—be a little lenient, a little patient with me.”

He makes his request in good faith, apparently. Though, as a student of human nature, he must have a perception of the fact that love has as little to do with leniency as passion has with either patience or prudence.

“I think mamma and you had better have a talk,” the girl says, speaking almost hysterically, in her futile rage; “it’s dreadful to me to have to say things to a person who doesn’t feel what I say a bit——”

“My dear May,” he interrupts, philosophically and hopefully, “why, if you feel that, why say them? Believe me, I should be happier if you never uttered hard words to me, and I am sure that you would be better pleased with yourself if you could maintain a golden silence; all this comes to nothing.”

He does not mean to goad the girl, he only wants to air his vain, selfish theory of keeping the bloom on his own life while he may. He is one of the apostles of the creed which declares that it is right and well to give the greatest happiness to the greatest number. The "individual" may suffer! That is nothing to Frank Forest; he wishes to avert pain and confusion from the families of Forest and Constable, and—from himself. May will possibly be teased, and Kate probably tortured to death; but—what matter? Appearances will be preserved, and his own path smoothed.

"All this comes to nothing," she echoes, rising up and throwing off the semblance of being industrious and engrossed with her lace-work; "how painfully true! You have no more feeling for what I suffer than if you were a block of ice. I would rather never see you again than go on as I have gone on for the last month or two; my life has been a misery to me ever since your cousin came up."

“Do leave my cousin out of the question,” he says, as she pauses to wipe away her fast-falling tears. “My poor cousin has no great reason to bless the day she came among us,” he adds softly.

“Then you have been making love to her,” May cries; “your own words condemn you, Frank, and justify me in all I have said. It’s mean of you as well as cruel to go on keeping up appearances with me while you’re lavishing your love on her; what shall I gain by being your wife to compensate me for the knowledge I have now that you don’t care for me, that you only care for——”

“Don’t say that,” he says, sternly; “don’t soil your lips by the utterance of an insult that I could never forgive; you must think badly of me, indeed, if you think that it’s only your money I want,” he goes on in a contradictory spirit, wording the very accusation against himself which he had entreated her not to make.

“I thought we were going to have such a happy long day together,” May sobs, supinely,

in response ; “and it’s turning out so miserable, and I can’t help it.”

“You broached the disagreeable topic,” he says, and he doesn’t attempt to dry her tears.

“Oh, Frank, how could I help it ; I can’t let things go on as they—are—going ; it wouldn’t be just to myself to let myself be treated as if I were a nonentity. You *must* speak to mamma ; I won’t go on in this way.”

He drives her nearly mad at this juncture by casting himself back in his chair in serio-comic dismay.

“Only tell me what way you want to go on in, and it shall be so,” he laughs out. “I’m prepared for anything, the best or the worst ; you’ll find me most acquiescent, May, only—make up your mind as to what you want before you begin.”

“Oh ! I will call mamma,” May says, in a voice that is broken by a sob of very genuine and justifiable anger ; and with this she goes out of the room, with tears rolling down her cheeks.

Presently Mrs. Constable advances to the attack, quite after the manner of a mother on the stage. That is to say, she chatters volubly as she comes through the hall to some person or persons unseen, and her voice is raised to a very high pitch indeed as she enters the room. Frank feels at once that his interview with May has been child's-play compared to that which is to come with May's mother.

"This is most painful, Frank," she commences, the instant she gets into the room. "I have always said that I never would interfere between my children and their husbands and wives, but——"

"I not being May's husband yet, you think you may interfere between us," he laughs out. "My dear Mrs. Constable, this is a mere tempest in a tea-cup; May has created an ideal wrong and is worrying herself about it; but I can assure you that she must be convinced presently that she has no cause for annoyance."

("No just cause that she knows of, poor

little thing,") he has the grace to add this clause mentally.

"I don't know about that," Mrs. Constable replies; "it's all very well for you to come back to May now, and take everything for granted as if you had never gone away; and never even condescended to explain why you went away; but May's proper pride is hurt as well as her feelings. I'm thankful to say that no child of mine is deficient in proper pride. She has no desire to thrust herself upon you; but really, while you retain her promise and keep up the pretence of being engaged to her, things must be different. I cannot see my child suffer."

Frank's manly spirit revolts at all this, and his manly brain whirls round as he contemplates the abyss of servitude into which they are striving to drag him.

"May brings all her sufferings on herself," he says, coolly. "I am not responsible for the imaginary foes to her peace whom she conjures up, and I am no Don Quixote, to go out and do battle against windmills. If

May—or you for her—are not satisfied with my line of conduct, we had better fairly understand each other, and bring the affair to a conclusion.”

“Do you mean break off the engagement!” Mrs. Constable cries, lifting her hands up in horror. “No, no, Mr. Forest; I have put up with much from you, but if the engagement is to be broken off, it must be my child who does it. Do you know what you are under-rating, and throwing aside? Why, May, with her beauty and her wealth, might, as her uncle says, and indeed all her friends say, command a coronet!”

Frank suppresses a groan; he also suppresses the words, “Let her command it forthwith, and give me my order of release,” and aloud he says—

“Don’t mistake me, Mrs. Constable; it rests entirely with May; I shall never desire to break my engagement with May; whatever I may be, I am a fellow who keeps his word, and holds a promise to be a very sacred thing.”

He says all this in absolute sincerity. He means it all as thoroughly at the time, as if he had not been on the brink of breaking his promise a dozen times. In fact, Frank's theories are admirable, and he has a habit of airing them, in a way that deludes himself into the belief that he puts them into practice frequently.

"I am sure I don't know what to do," Mrs. Constable says, in perplexity.

"You're not called upon to do anything," he says, cheerily, in the vain belief that the stream of talk is arrested in its flow, and that there is nothing more disagreeable going to be said.

"But I don't know what to advise," the harassed mother continues; "it's all very well for you to be cool and indifferent about it, but if you were May's mother, you would feel very differently, very differently indeed. When I see that dear girl wretched about some trouble that I can't remove from her, do you think it unnatural that I should speak to you, and blame you too, Frank?"

Though I'm as fond of you as if you were my son already, and I'm sure a break would be a very terrible thing to us all."

She stops, overcome by emotion, and Frank feels painfully low, and quite as if he were united in holy matrimony to the whole family already. Before he can frame a fitting reply to the half prayer, half condemnation, which Mrs. Constable has worded, the door is opened impetuously, and the married sister, Mrs. Grange, is in their midst.

Mrs. Grange has immense natural advantages on her side in every contest into which she ventures against the male sex. She is gifted with commanding height, a high voice, and a cuttingly distinct articulation. She can talk down any human being who opposes her, and this without saying anything very particular, or to the point that may be in question. Under all circumstances she loves to direct the storm ; and if there is no special storm to direct, she loves to create one. She feels now that she has come in

most opportunely, and charges straight at her victim in a gallant way, that makes her mother blink with admiration for her daughter's prowess.

“Well, Frank,” she commences, sweeping her draperies around and about him, in an aggressive manner; “I can only tell you, that if you had me to deal with, instead of May, you would find a great difference: she has told me a word—only a word, for I must say May is getting most abominably close, mamma—and I must ask you, if you imagine for a moment that her family can permit this sort of thing to go on; if I were in May's place, instead of crying my eyes out as she is doing now, I should bid you go back to your cousin, about whom I have just heard some very strange things!”

CHAPTER XV.

COMPLICATED.

THE little impromptu supper of last night, at which not one of the three could say anything in secret to another, has paved the way to a friendly and apparently easy and pleasant intercourse between the trio who find themselves together unpremeditatedly at Lynmouth. The two ladies do not evince the faintest surprise, when Bellairs calls in the morning, before they have finished breakfast, to ask them if they will go with him to the darkly, sweetly, solitary haunt of the red deer, immortalized now by the clever author who has vitalized the old robber story, and made "the Doon," a household name in the land.

In truth, he is delighted to see the friend-

ship and intimacy which seem to exist between these two women. He knows a goodly portion of the sad truth concerning poor Mrs. Angerstein. He is ready and willing to make Kate Mervyn his wife to-morrow, if only he can win her. At the same time, he does not shrink from the thought of the comradeship which has sprung up between the two, but is, on the contrary, desirous of advancing it in any way that he possibly can without seeming effusive. For he knows that while Cissy can never possibly do Kate any harm, Kate will probably do Cissy the great good of restoring the latter's confidence in the heaven-born tenderness of her fellow-creatures.

That he gets a little misunderstood by one of these women is only natural. Kate, the better and brighter of the two as she is, is the one who falls prone and helpless into the deepest error. "He wants to show me that I am nothing more to him than she is—that I take rank in his memory merely as a girl whose foolish passion was a pastime to him

while it lasted, and to which he is contemptuously tolerant now, as he looks back upon it. He thinks we're a pair of fools, I'm sure—for probably her worst offence is, that she loved him too, and let him know it."

Nevertheless, though Kate thinks all these, and many other hard and uncomfortable things, she accepts the situation of being on apparently friendly terms with him again very readily and gracefully. "Perhaps, if he can be made to quite realize that I am heartily repentant of that by-gone folly, and that I blame myself for it all, much more than I blame him, he will understand me better, and go out of my way, instead of staying here to patronize me—as he would never attempt to patronize a woman who hadn't shown herself weak on his account once;" she tells herself, in the fervour of her intense belief in it being a fact that a man is more lenient to, and has a larger meed of forgiveness for, every fault and folly that can be committed by a woman, than this one—that she should love himself without his

having given her (what he deems to be) sufficient cause.

They drive over to the banks of the river that runs through the heart of the Doon valley, and fish, and read away the sunny hours of one of the hottest days of the year. As the three keep together, sagaciously, the whole time, there is no opportunity for private communication between Kate and her old lover; consequently, there is no occasion for jealousy tearing Mrs. Angerstein's heart to pieces. A soft, lulling sense of rest steals over her, as she finds herself once more by the side of the man who strove to serve her so wisely and well in the old days; and, out of consideration for him, she tries hard to think and speak freely and affectionately of her husband, and of the probability of his joining them to-night.

"It's been rather hard on him, poor fellow, for the last fortnight," she says. "It's his greatest relaxation, when he comes in from his rounds, to play with his children; and I have been heartless enough not only to

come away myself, but to bring the children with me. In every letter he tells me how wretched he is without us ; that's a good tribute, isn't it, after being married seven years ? ”

“ If you were my wife, Cissy, and I felt wretched without you, I should insist on your going home without delay,” Captain Bellairs, says, in utter unconsciousness of the storm of feeling which the bare suggestion creates in Mrs. Angerstein's breast. For one weak, unguarded moment she looks at him with her heart in her eyes ; and he, happening to glance up at that moment, meets the look, and would be more or less than man, if he did not read it aright.

The knowledge comes upon him with humbling, shocking force. In all his experience of Cissy, he has never surmised or feared anything so infinitely distressing to himself as this, that she should love him with a love so widely different to his fraternal feeling for her, that it must poison her happiness, and upset the peaceful balance of

her life. He does not despise nor condemn the woman for the womanly weakness of having yielded to a feeling he has never sought to call into being. He does not feel elated at a conquest he has never striven to make. All he feels is profound pity and tenderness for the mistake she has made. "Poor little thing! I wouldn't have cost her this pain for the world," he thinks, pitifully, as her eyes droop before his. Then his eyes wander to Kate's observant face, and he feels sorrowfully that he must throw away another chance; that he must leave Kate before they understand each other, or, at any rate, before she understands him; for he knows that he is in honour bound to get out of Mrs. Angerstein's way as soon as possible.

The revelation, spasmodic and slight as it has been, is lasting and powerful in its sobering influence over the two whom it concerns. The light, easily subdued spirit of the married woman is crushed within her, by the consciousness that this man must think

as little of her as a wife as he has heretofore had reason to think of her as a woman. She is as penitential, as she sits there cowering before him, as if she had done him some underhand ill turn. "He feels that my love is a disgrace to him, and that I'm ungrateful to make him such a return after all his goodness to me," she thinks in her self-abasement; and he, all the while, is feeling such pity for her as he would not dare to allow himself to feel, if there was a possibility of the pity ever merging into anything warmer.

"We've come to the end of each other and ourselves," Kate says presently, as she finds herself becoming gradually infected by the depression of her companions; "and there's nothing left to eat or drink in the basket; and the coach will be in before we get back to Lynmouth; don't you think we had better start? Mr. Angerstein will bring down some news and fresh ideas——"

"And we shall not feel ashamed of re-setting and transposing the limited stock of words in which we have been expressing

our admiration for the beauties of the valley, and the invigorating nature of the breeze on the hills; altogether he will be a healthy element: let us go back and get him to mingle with us without delay."

Captain Bellairs tries to say all this in a way that shall lead Mrs. Angerstein to believe that he supposes her to be full of pleasure at the idea of the anticipated arrival of her husband; and she understands his intention, and is grateful for it, but cannot, for the life of her, respond to, or back him up in, his endeavour.

"I shall feel so glad when he comes, on account of the children," she says, a little awkwardly; "they are thrown out of their usual routine, and are getting dreadfully unruly, aren't they, Kate? Mr. Angerstein will soon bring them into order again, though."

"He has failed in bringing you completely into order, hasn't he, Cissy?" he says, in a jocular way, of which he repents him instantly, as she turns away after giving him

an answer with her beseeching eyes, that her quivering lips refuse to utter. She has bared her wound before him so unintentionally that it does seem cruel on his part to ignore it utterly, and to seem to speak in a sportive way as if she were sound and unhurt.

"I detest that kind of boneless talk about husbands bringing their wives into proper subjection," Kate puts in; "what creature is worth anything when it's cowed? A reasonable meed of consideration for his views, and a reasonable toleration for his sentiments, is all that any man requires from women at large; why should he require more from the woman who is his wife, and who, therefore, is compelled to hear more of them than any other person in the world?"

"Mr. Angerstein never requires blind obedience, and he is so perfectly reasonable that he will never argue with me when I'm angry," Cissy says, speaking under the feeble impression that it behoves her to say something in defence of her absent lord, who has never been attacked.

“There is so much vice in virtue as a rule,” Kate goes on, pursuing her own views on the subject, without much regard for Mrs. Angerstein’s interpolations; “there is so much selfishness in paring away our angles in order to fit ourselves more comfortably into our respective niches; to me there is no merit in making the best of it, unless it means making the best of it for others entirely, and not for ourselves at all.”

“It certainly is a wife’s duty to make the best of things for her husband,” Mrs. Angerstein says—an uneasy feeling pervading her to the effect that she is being engulfed in a conversational stream in which she will speedily be out of her depth.

“It is her inclination, if she loves him—and if she doesn’t love him, it makes things smoother and pleasanter for herself in the long run,” Kate replies; “love and expediency are the only two laws that are recognized in reality.”

“If you really mean what you say, Kate, I shall pity the man who marries you,”

Mrs. Angerstein says ; “ if you don’t happen to love him, a sense of duty will never make you a good wife.”

“ A sense of duty never made a woman a good wife yet ; it may make her a capital housekeeper, and a pleasant companion (no, a sense of duty isn’t what makes women pleasant companions though), and an excellent mother, and a perfect domestic machine altogether ; it may make her a very comfortable woman to live with, but it will not make her what I understand by a ‘ good wife.’ ”

He tries to look into her eyes as she speaks, and make her understand how thoroughly he appreciates her. All his thoughts are of her as she describes the woman she is not like, and all her thoughts are of Frank.

“ You’re right, Kate,” he whispers ; “ it is love, and love only, that makes the perfect woman a combination of child and queen—”

“ Of tyrant and slave, you mean,” she interrupts ; “ good gracious ! don’t think that I’m weak enough not to know that

there is a great deal more evil than good in it; but it's the only law that is obeyed for itself alone, with no hope of reward, and very often in defiance of the certain knowledge that we shall do ourselves most deadly damage, if we obey its dictates; I'm speaking about women—it never hurts men," she winds up, a little bitterly, as she reviews her own experiences, and sees that a sadder shadow than she has ever noticed there before has settled down on the pretty, fair face of Mrs. Angerstein.

"You're anxious to get home, and meet your husband, are you not?" Kate says, considerately; "do drive faster, Captain Belairs; we have been weakly theorizing while Mrs. Angerstein has been practically suffering from the pangs of impatience. I always paint mental pictures of what people are like, before I see them; Mr. Angerstein shall have a little portrait of himself, as I imagine him, to-morrow."

"My husband is a very good-looking man," Cissy says, with a feeble effort to

infuse an accent of pride into her remark ; “ he’s a very good man too ; I hope you will like him, Harry,” she adds, looking at him timidly, and saying it more for the sake of calling him by his name, than with any other view.

“ I’m tolerably certain to like any one who’s fond of you, and of whom you’re fond,” he replies ; and the reply is so eminently unsatisfactory to Mrs. Angerstein, that she has no words wherewith to carry on the conversation.

There is intense heat and weight in the air as the evening draws on. Torpor settles over everything, and the languid horse can hardly exert himself to whisk his tail with sufficient vigour to drive away the swarms of flies that are humming and buzzing about. Sheet lightning plays around, and glorifies the purple heather and yellow gorse with which wide surfaces on either side are bejewelled. Thunder rumbles about morosely in the distance. Big clouds lower sullenly about, and occasionally drop

heavy, passionate tears, that the scorching heat quickly dries up. Cows in the fields are too tired to stand up, and too hot to lie down, and too idiotic to understand that they make matters worse by herding together. The birds fly low, and the wild flowers hang their heads. The tempest is nearly upon them as they get to the bottom of the hill, and turn with a flagging air toward Mrs. Angerstein's lodgings.

It bursts out, peal after peal, flash after flash, before they gain the door, and then their progress is delayed by a little terror-stricken crowd, which is surging about in a helpless way. Several faces in the crowd are turned up pityingly towards the dog-cart which Captain Bellairs is driving, and several voices say, "That's her; the little, light lady is the wife." There are a few wild questions asked, a few halting, commiserating answers given, and the cause of the crowd is made clear to Mrs. Angerstein. Her husband has slipped in getting off the coach at the top of a perilous hill, which he distrusted descend-

ing behind four horses, and the two near wheels have passed over his back. "As nice a gentleman as ever sat on that 'ere box-seat," the driver of the coach observes to any one who will listen to him. "Coach-driving ain't all sweets, I say, though there's few as has been on the road so long, as has had fewer accidents than I."

"By road or by sea, there's few of us women who are wives who don't know trouble by one or other on 'em," a gentle-faced woman, whose husband is a sailor, drawls out in the soft lingering accents of the west; and even as she is saying it her naturally low voice drops lower still, and a hush comes over the crowd, for Captain Bellairs comes out with the pallor of horror and sorrow on his face, and without words bids the crowd disperse itself.

They do it without a murmur, for the bright spirit of Hope has fled, and the dark spirit of Suspense has vanished at the approach of the black king Death. It is all certainty now—as far as those who are left

behind are concerned. The husband is dead, and the wife is a widow ; and the friend who feels as a brother towards her is most horribly perplexed. For the landlady tells him—

“ His only words after he was brought into this house, sir, was of his lady and you ; ‘ you’d see justice done to her, and take care of her ; and he died happy, thinking he left her to you,’ he said ; her brother, sir, if I may make so bold ? ”

CHAPTER XVI.

“THE LITTLE SPEC.”

Mrs. GRANGE's fluency has, if appearances are to be relied upon, had its due effect on Frank Forest. He has sought and soothed his May. He has even gone further, out of his extreme desire to keep things smooth. He has taught her to think that she has been the one who has halted, and hesitated, and vacillated. “As Frank says,” May tells her sister, “it's not becoming for a man to press a girl too hard; I daresay I am very trying to him,” May goes on simply. “I expect more, you know, than any man ever rendered up to any woman before.”

Her sister looks at May sharply.

“If you're satisfied, your family have no right to complain,” she says, presently.

"Thank goodness, it's you who are going to marry him and not I. I suppose something has been said about the wedding day? Every one is asking me, and it's awkward to have to say that Mr. Forest hasn't quite made up his mind as to whether he will take you at all or not."

"I wish you wouldn't be so bitter," poor May sobs; "it's that which makes me so disagreeable to Frank very often; and he has said something about the wedding day; he has said a great deal about it. He wants to be married very quietly, and he doesn't mind how soon it is."

"That last clause is a great condescension on his part, and very flattering to you," Mrs. Grange replies. "My dear May, as I said just now, if you're satisfied, your family have no right to complain; but I must say that he is showing very plainly that he doesn't want to marry you at all."

This conversation takes place about a week after the last one that has been recorded between May and Frank; and in the interim,

May, not having been driven on at the point of that sword, her sister's tongue, has been rather placidly pleasant to Frank than otherwise. He is purchasing present peace at the price of surrendering up his presence and his reasoning faculties to Miss Constable ; but he feels that the yoke is a heavy one, and knows that he will find it heavier still, when it is fastened upon him by legal bonds.

He has brought himself to write one letter to Kate, and Kate receives it on the morning after Mr. Angerstein's death. It is as follows :—

“My own darling—for that you will always be, though I dare not ask you to be my wife—I am not worthy of another thought of yours ; still, for Heaven's sake, don't give up thinking of me kindly. I am to be married to May in a few weeks, and I mean manfully to try and make her a good husband ; but every possibility of happiness will vanish from my life from the day that makes her my wife. I can't pen the canting humbug that some men would pen on such an

occasion, and that is, pray that you may bless some worthier man. I only know that if you ever do so I shall curse the 'worthier man.' But I think I know you, Kate. I think, faulty as I have been, that you will never be false to the love you so richly and generously endowed me with. May I see you once more? Yours, F. F."

He means every word of this effusion most thoroughly, and he is so touched by the sensation of the emotions the writing of it has caused him, that he is blind to all the cruelty and meanness contained in every sentence of it. His passion for Kate revives so strongly while he is writing to her, that he really commends himself for not penning even warmer words. He almost compliments himself on the unselfishness with which he refrains from urging her to give him a definite promise that she will guard her heart against any other man.

His conscience clears itself considerably when he sees May for the first time after he has posted this letter. It seems to him that

he has done her such an act of justice, that his sense of right-doing almost obliterates from his memory the thought of the pain that must be Kate's portion, when she receives that letter. In an easy and off-hand way he tells May what he has done.

"By the way," he says, "I have just been writing to my cousin Kate, to tell her that our little affair is settled, and that she had better begin to think of the present."

"Why couldn't your sisters have written?" May questions quickly; "and I am sure I don't want a present from her; I only care to take presents from people I love and trust."

"You must love and trust a good round number," Frank says; "you told me yesterday that you had put down the names of four hundred people from whom you expected gifts on the happy occasion."

"I am happy to say that I don't know any one like Miss Mervyn," May says with pointed emphasis. "No, Frank, I am not jealous; I have not such a low opinion of

myself as to be jealous of a girl whom I never heard any one else admire but yourself; but when people outrage propriety, I neither like nor trust them."

"How has she outraged propriety?" Frank asks in a passion.

"Ask yourself," May says, tersely.

"I do, and answer solemnly that she has never done so."

"Then I'll tell you something that will make even you change that opinion," May says, beginning to cry a little, for she is half frightened at her own audacity. "She ran away with a married man once; there!"

"Whoever told you so, lies."

"It's very easy to say that, Frank, but not at all easy to prove it. I was dancing with a friend of Clement Graham's last night, and we talked about poor Clement; and he said he would tell me a romance in real life, that was the commencement of poor Clement's ruin. Shall I tell it to you?"

"Yes," Frank says; and his betrothed proceeds to give a highly coloured and garbled

version of the old story that began in Torquay. As he listens to it his face grows pale, and his heart beats, and his manner becomes such that poor misguided May cannot any longer doubt as to whether he loves his cousin or not.

“It was vengeance against Clement Graham that made him pick the quarrel, and get Clement turned out of the service. Clement had baulked him, and exposed him, and carried away the girl from him, and he wanted revenge. So much for your cousin.”

“Did the gabbling idiot tell you the name of the man?” he asks.

“No; he’d either forgotten it or never heard it; but there was no doubt about the girl being your Kate Mervyn; he was quite surprised to hear that she was in society; people down in Torquay cut her directly—naturally, you know.”

He makes an effort to collect his scattered thoughts, and remembers that Kate has expressed sympathy for Clement Graham. Thoughts of Clement Graham suggest

thoughts of Bellairs ; and with a moan of bitter dread and shame he remembers that she has cautioned him against Bellairs, as a married man bent on concealing the fact of his marriage.

"It's a lie from beginning to end," he says, trying to impress May with an idea of his disbelief in it ; "all the same, kill and bury it as carefully as if it were a truth."

"You won't wish me to associate with Miss Mervyn until it is cleared up, Frank ? A girl against whom such a charge is made can hardly expect to come back and be received as if nothing had happened."

Kate to be spoken about in this way ! Kate, the freest, dearest, frankest woman who had ever crossed his path : Kate, in whose veins his own blood ran, who was dear to him as a cousin and member of his own family, as well as dear to him as the passion of his life ! It is all too humiliating, too sad a shame for a man to bear up against.

"If it turns out to be true," he says, sur-

rendering his first position of utter disbelief. "I shall give up the game, and get out of the country——"

"I'm not going to live abroad because your cousin has disgraced herself," May says, hardly. In justification of her hardness, it must be told that Frank's agony is agonizing to her. He is making it so very plain to her that Kate is precious to him—that every blow aimed at her reputation strikes and hurts him.

"Use softer words, May," he says, brokenly, "and be true to me, by keeping this wretched rumour to yourself; it may be that we shall have to part; for—you speak of what you will do if 'my cousin has disgraced herself;' now understand once and for ever, that whatever may be the truth of it, I stand by her."

"I believe you'd rejoice in anything if it parted us, and left you free for her," May sobs; and Frank feels that it is indeed a hopeless task to endeavour to get May to understand him after this.

"I'll clear it up," he tells himself; "I'll go down to my poor darling, and if she tells me it's true, I'll hunt down the fellow who wronged her, and I'll horsewhip any other fellow who ever speaks about it."

He does not tell May of his intention of going down into Somersetshire. Miss Constable is much occupied in her interesting preparations, in superintending the composition of the various costumes by means of which she intends to vindicate English taste on the Continent during the honeymoon. Frank has been offered his freedom for three or four days, and he means to avail himself of it.

He has not attempted to come to a definite determination as to what he shall do, if the "wretched rumour" has the slightest foundation. To "love Kate through it all," is his expressed resolve to himself; to revile her for having ever cared for another fellow sufficiently to compromise herself, is his unexpressed one. Happily for every one concerned, poor Kate is, as we know, inno-

cent of everything, save having made the mistake of believing Clement Graham's word, rather than that of Captain Bellairs.

"Kate's at Lynmouth, isn't she?" Frank asks of his sister Gertrude this night, when they all meet in the drawing-room, rather late, and each one fully occupied with his or her own interests.

"At Lynmouth!" Gertrude ejaculates.

"Why it's to Lynmouth Captain Bellairs is gone, isn't it?" Mrs. Forest questions, rearing herself up on the sofa.

"The devil it is!" Frank puts in angrily, for the pieces of the puzzle are beginning to adjust themselves too nicely.

"Harry Bellairs didn't know that Kate was there, mamma, if you mean that," Gertrude says, in a manner that is as dignified as the knowledge that she is shaking with mingled mortification and jealousy will allow her to make it.

"Even if he had known it, Kate wouldn't have wanted him there; he's not the sort of

fellow Kate cares to have hanging about her, she let me see that."

"Kate is so clever, she lets every one see exactly what she wants to be seen," Gertrude says; "please don't look as if you had just found out a conundrum, Marian."

"You're a riddle that any one who runs may read," the younger sister laughs out; "but why this sudden family feeling as to Kate's whereabouts? do you want to see our revered uncle again, Frank?"

"I want to hear from herself whether or not there is any foundation for an infernal lie that is going about——"

"About Kate herself?" Gertrude asks.

"About Kate herself," her brother replies; and Gertrude flushes scarlet at the recollection of the tale which has been told to her by Captain Bellairs.

"If I were in your place I wouldn't fish in troubled waters," Gertrude says, presently; "poor Kate, who has led such a quiet, peaceful life! What could be more insulting and offensive to her than to go and

tell her of any idle report that has been raised about her in town on account of her beauty and her charm ; that's all it is, depend upon it, Frank. Now hasn't May been teasing you ? May would rejoice in your offending Kate ; it would cut you off from your cousin for ever."

"There is something in that," Frank says, and he not only says it but he feels it. Nevertheless, the excuse to go down and set straight a family crookedness is too good a one to be neglected. Accordingly he gets up early the next morning, and is down at Lynmouth by six o'clock in the evening.

He hears of Mr. Angerstein's death, and of the despair of Mr. Angerstein's widow, within ten minutes of his arrival. The despair (though neither he nor any one else knows it) is consequent on the dereliction of duty of which in her own heart she knows herself to have been guilty. He also hears that the young lady "who is staying with Mrs. Angerstein has walked up to Watersmeet this evening ;" and up to Watersmeet

he follows her presently, with his love and pride in arms, and his heart the battleground for a bitter combat between inclination and duty.

Beautiful Watersmeet has witnessed the development and the death of many a love, and the despondency and despair of many a lover. But probably it has never witnessed anything more embarrassing than the meeting which takes place this evening. Frank walking up eagerly, full of hope of meeting her there alone, comes suddenly upon a quiet pair whom for a minute or two he does not recognize. The lady is leaning forward, her eyes shrouded from the light of the dying day by her hand. The man is lounging back, trying to keep his cigar alight at the same time as he is murmuring out the words of a song, that seem to sing themselves as he utters them. Altogether it is a perfect picture of love in idleness.

These are the words he is saying—these are the words Frank Forest finds himself compelled to listen to:—

Hush ! heath-fed wind, let song-birds sweet,
Hid high in sunny beams,
To the awakened soul repeat
The music of her dreams.

When liquid sheets of moonshine drowned
The darkness of the dell,
And made a mystic light around
The chanting Philomel.

And thou whose lip's soft language, heard
The heart's fleet throbs among,
Revealed without one uttered word,
The secret of all song.

Oh ! silent lips that said so much,
So sweetly and so plain,
Why said you not I ne'er should touch
Your loveliness again ?

I go—farewell dear love—but now
The wanderer is removed,
Forget not that he loved as thou
Wert worthy to be loved.

“They're very pretty,” Kate Mervyn's voice says clearly ; “but I don't quite like your making a man rebuke a girl for not being colder. Where is the woman who could care for a man after he threw her back upon herself in that way ?”

“The woman is here if she loved the man before he said it,” Captain Bellairs says ;

"Kate, the meaning of that song is for you: why have you given me the joy of this evening—why have you shown me that I am unforgiven, and, therefore, unforgotten still, if you can't go any further,—if you can't——"

"Oh! Frank, Frank!" she cries out, rising and stretching her hands out towards him as he breaks through the boughs that are bending down and overshadowing the bend of the river by lovely Watersmeet.

CHAPTER XVII.

“TWO GUINEAS A YARD!—WASTED!”

“THE house begins to smell of orange-blossom,” Marian Forest says, coming into the very heart of the Constable establishment one morning. “Have you named the day yet, May? Have you decided when we are to be called upon to see the saddest sight of all, a gay and girlish thing throw aside her maiden gladness for a name, and for a ring?”

“It’s too important a subject to joke about,” May says with solemnity. “Young as I am,” (May, it shall be remarked, in passing, is one of the girls who always have their youth in their mouths) “I think a great deal about the responsibilities I am going to take upon myself; my brother

Arthur was here yesterday, and he put my duty about Frank very plainly before me ; I must wean him from the stage and everything connected with it, Arthur says, and I mean to do it."

"I think you'll find Frank a torment of a child to wean, my dear," Marian says with a laugh. "However, if you like hard work, there's nothing to be said against your giving your soul to the struggle. Don't put him on milk diet too suddenly, though ; it's apt to revolt one if it comes after a long course of champagne. This is a sad affair down at Lynmouth, isn't it ? That poor little fragile woman ; what a lucky thing for her that Kate is with her !"

There are few things more irritating to an irritable person than that another should assume that the topic he introduces is fully understood by the first, when, indeed, the first is utterly in the dark about it. It is not surprising, therefore, that May's answer is a captious one.

"What in the world are you talking

about? What is the sad affair at Lynmouth?"

"Hasn't Frank told you of Mr. Angerstein's death? such an awful death, too," Marian goes on, preparing to launch out into details.

"No; I haven't seen Frank for two days. I'm driven to death about my dresses, and so I gave him leave of absence."

"Of course you haven't seen him, but I thought he would have written about it; you see it happened the day before he arrived there, and——"

"What happened the day before he arrived where?" May interrogates, with mantling colour and gleaming eyes.

"Mr. Angerstein's death, the day before he arrived at Lynmouth," Marian says quickly; and May becomes tragic in her passion as she hears the words.

"Two guineas a yard!—wasted!" she exclaims, catching hold of the rich folds of white satin that are rippling over the table. "He's gone down to that girl again, to your

cousin Kate ; and if he has I shall never want a wedding dress for him, for I won't put up with it ! ”

“ Didn't you know he was gone ? Stupid of him to make a mystery of it ” (Marian, who is not in love with the object under discussion, and therefore not rabidly jealous about him, says carelessly) ; “ but do let me tell you about the accident ; poor man, he was killed.”

“ I shouldn't care if they had all been killed,” May sobs, but at the same time she carefully wipes some tear-drops from the white satin. It has been ordered prematurely, and Frank has proved himself unworthy of its being worn on his account ; but there are other men in the world without cousins, let us hope.

“ Well, they weren't all killed,” Marian, who is full of the story, and will persist in telling it, goes on ; “ they say his agonies were frightful ; at least Kate says in a letter to mamma to-day that the recollection of the agony she saw him suffer will dim her

life, however bright her life may be otherwise. Captain Bellairs is there too."

"It's too horrible," May says, relapsing; and for a moment Marian believes that it is the grievously sad death the thought of which is overcoming May, but instantly the latter explains herself.

"The four of them down there together! Oh! it's horrible, shameful!" May whimpers; "and she must know how badly I'm being treated, and that makes it worse."

"If you would only take things quietly, they always come right in the end," Marian puts in placidly. "My dear child, I know what Frank is; he loves every woman he meets for half an hour; it's such an easy nature to deal with. Provide him with a fresh bagatelle board every now and then, and he will disport himself upon the same, and be perfectly oblivious for the time of what other people are about. I like men who flit all round in that way, they never do anything dreadful or desperate, and they make the time pass away."

"I don't think that's enough," May says.

"It would go a great way with me, even if it weren't everything," Marian rejoins, giving breadth to her views as she witnesses May's profound dismay. "A wife, like the heart, should, to a certain degree, you know—well, within the bounds of propriety—be a free and a fetterless thing. Now you're always clogged in a most pitiful manner if a man is thinking of you and you only."

"You're trying to talk me into a greater state of confusion than I am in already," May rejoins, indignantly. "You're trying to dazzle me out of thinking of Frank's abominable conduct; you're exactly like Frank, Marian; you hate to hear disagreeable truths, and it is the truth that Frank's conduct to me is outrageous."

A great many more idle words are uttered on the subject before the worn out thing is suffered to lie down and rest in the house of the Constables this day. Mrs. Grange comes in and looks at it from the worldly point of view, and May's brother looks at it from the

punctiliously conscientious and manly points of view, and they are compelled to admit to May that they are not satisfied with it. Still it is a hard task for them to perform, this of telling May that she is right in her resolve of breaking it off with a man who regards her so lightly as Frank obviously does. For May wishes to have her resolution combated and upset. It will be a wrench that will sadly bruise and mangle them, when she tears away the tendrils of all her tenderest feelings from the one around whom they have been accustomed to twine for so long.

“I won’t make any undignified concessions,” May promises, at length; “but do let me wait till he comes back to-morrow; Marian says he’s sure to come back to-morrow, and then he’ll probably explain himself.”

However, to-morrow comes, and Frank does not appear; but there comes a letter from him, a maddening letter in its cool assumption of indifference to what poor May must be feeling.

"I can't congratulate myself sufficiently," he writes, "on having chanced to come down here just now. Without me Kate would have been in a very difficult and painful position, for Mrs. Angerstein is dangerously ill. Bellairs refuses to leave the place, and Kate, of course, is compelled to stay and nurse her friend. It would have been an awkward fix for her, poor girl, if I had not been here to think and to act for her. I have got my uncle to come over from Dunster; he stays with me at the hotel, and I do all I can to keep him satisfied with the change from his own shell. It is impossible for me to leave him yet, as if I do he will be off at once; and my cousin Kate can't remain here with Mrs. Angerstein in a state of delirium, and Bellairs in a state of infatuation and despair. By the way, I haven't discovered which of them it is for whom he is infatuated and despairing. For his sake let us hope it is Kate, as the poor little widow will have a tight time of it, even if she gets through this illness at all." He

then adds something about May not needing to worry herself about him, as the illness is not at all infectious, and concludes by assuring her that he is "hers ever.—F. F."

She reads the letter over once, and feels her heart falling lower and lower at each sentence. She reads it a second time, in the hope of deriving comfort from his frank mention of Kate, and his careful allusion to his uncle's saving presence there, and the hope is proved vain indeed! Apparently unpremeditated as is the style of that letter, she knows that it is written carefully, and guardedly, to save Kate from aspersion in the future, and to put her in an unassailable position in the present. All the thoughtfulness, all the care, all the prudence and consideration, are for Kate, not for her—not for the girl he is going to marry. These truths weigh down upon and humiliate her, and tell her that a parting between herself and this man, who won her without effort, and will lose her in the same way, is inevitable.

Her small caprices, her pettishness, her feeble vanity, her insignificant attempts at being exacting, when she has not the power to exact—all these follies lie down and abolish themselves now. There is something real and true in the feeling which animates her manner, when she goes to his mother with his letter, and her sorrow, and says—

“I’d bear this, and a thousand times more than this, if he loved me at all; but he doesn’t do it, and he’s too honest to pretend to do it, though he’s so accustomed to me, that he would go on with it, and marry me. I must give him up, mustn’t I?”

She hopes that Mrs. Forest will plead for her son, and protest against the determination. But Mrs. Forest is wrathful with Frank, disgusted with the careless want of skill with which he kicks the ball of fortune behind him, and indignant on behalf of May.

“I will not trust myself to say what I think of my son,” she says. Then, ever mindful of her own people, she adds—

“We must not confuse right with wrong, and censure Kate, because Frank is careless of everything, and neglectful of his duties. She has not sought him, remember; her duty is plainly before her, you must admit that. She was with this unhappy woman when the husband was killed; Christian charity commands that she shall remain with Mrs. Angerstein until she is out of danger.”

“Christian charity does not demand that she should keep Frank down there with her,” May says, mournfully; “however, Mrs. Forest, I shall have no right to express an opinion after this, for I shall give Frank up altogether, resign him entirely, and—I’ll try to be resigned myself.”

There is very little resignation—there is a very slight effort made to portray it, even on the poor girl’s part, as she says this. Dull as she is, mentally—dull as she knows herself to be—she has caught the contagion of appreciation, from having been in Frank’s atmosphere so long. When that atmo-

sphere is changed, there will be nothing left in that in which she is compelled to breathe, which she shall be able to appreciate. She will be obliged to fall back upon a different life and a different set of interests, and they will, she knows, all be so utterly tame and flat and colourless, compared with those Frank would have given her, had he loved her.

"But he never loved me, and you knew it, and—oh! it's cruel, cruel," she bursts out, in honest, impotent, loving wrath, as the full force of how little she is to him, and how much he is to her, is borne in upon her.

It is in Mrs. Forest's nature to temporise, and to make the best of things for the present, as it is in Frank's. But she is unlike her son in one respect. She will not coldly or carelessly sacrifice the future for the present. It is cruel, she knows that it is cruel, to try and blind May to her utter insufficiency as far as Frank is concerned.

“I think he never loved you as you deserved to be loved, May,” she says; and probably “in kindness,” no more cruel form of words to convey the truth that we have given more than we have got, can be used by one woman to another.

The pretty girl, who had never known what it was to have a crumple in the rose-leaf which could be immediately smoothed for her, until she knew Frank Forest, breaks down now, under her perfect sense of her utter inability to move him to show a proper meed of consideration for her.

“It’s the others—it’s the rest—it’s mamma and the others,” she gasps out; “I’d bear it all for myself, and nobody should know it, but——”

“The others can’t bear it for you; very properly too, my child,” Mrs. Forest interrupts. “I never defend my son when he is indefensible; my boy! he never fell short before,” she says; and then she turns away to hide her tears of rage and shame for the

folly which she cannot justify, and the consequences which she cannot avert.

That his mother is sympathetic with her is a sweet and soothing thing to May, but May is mortal, and she knows that other people will think she has been jilted, however prompt the steps she takes to avenge herself may be. Other people will think she has been jilted—and—there is that white sheeny satin at two guineas a yard lying fallow at home! May has never grudged herself anything in the way of dress, but then she has always had an immediate return for it. An investment in white satin, that does not turn out well, is always rather a dark speculation for a girl.

As she has determined to give him up, as she finds that she cannot help herself, and that there is nothing for her to do but to give him up, May would rather like to make a sort of solemn festival of it. So she bends herself to the task of asking to say "good-bye to the girls."

“But you’ll see them again, under any circumstances,” Mrs. Forest protests; and May, who will intensify the situation to the best of her poor little ability, says—

“No, Mrs. Forest; if it is to be all over, it had better be quite all over, you know: and it couldn’t be that if I were seeing Marian constantly, for Marian is like Frank.”

Yes! the mother knows it. Marian has all Frank’s cruelty, and kindness, and sweetness, and claw-sheathed-in-velvet charm.

“Marian is like Frank,” she says, diplomatically; “perhaps if you saw her a great deal—she has her brother’s nature—you might get to understand him better, to tolerate him more?”

“Oh! I’ve ‘tolerated’ enough from him,” May says, in a burst of rage at her own powerlessness to save herself from being thought either a traitor or a fool.

The two talk together freely after this, and the sisters come in, and strive, after the manner of sisters, to smooth things over.

But they cannot pretend, and May would not believe if they could, that she ought to hold to her bond with Frank.

It speaks well for the Forest girls that May beseeches them to go home with her, and be present at the breaking of the ultimatum to her own people. She clings to them still as representatives of the Frank from whom she is freeing herself; and even while she acknowledges that he has outraged her, puts them before her clan as mediators.

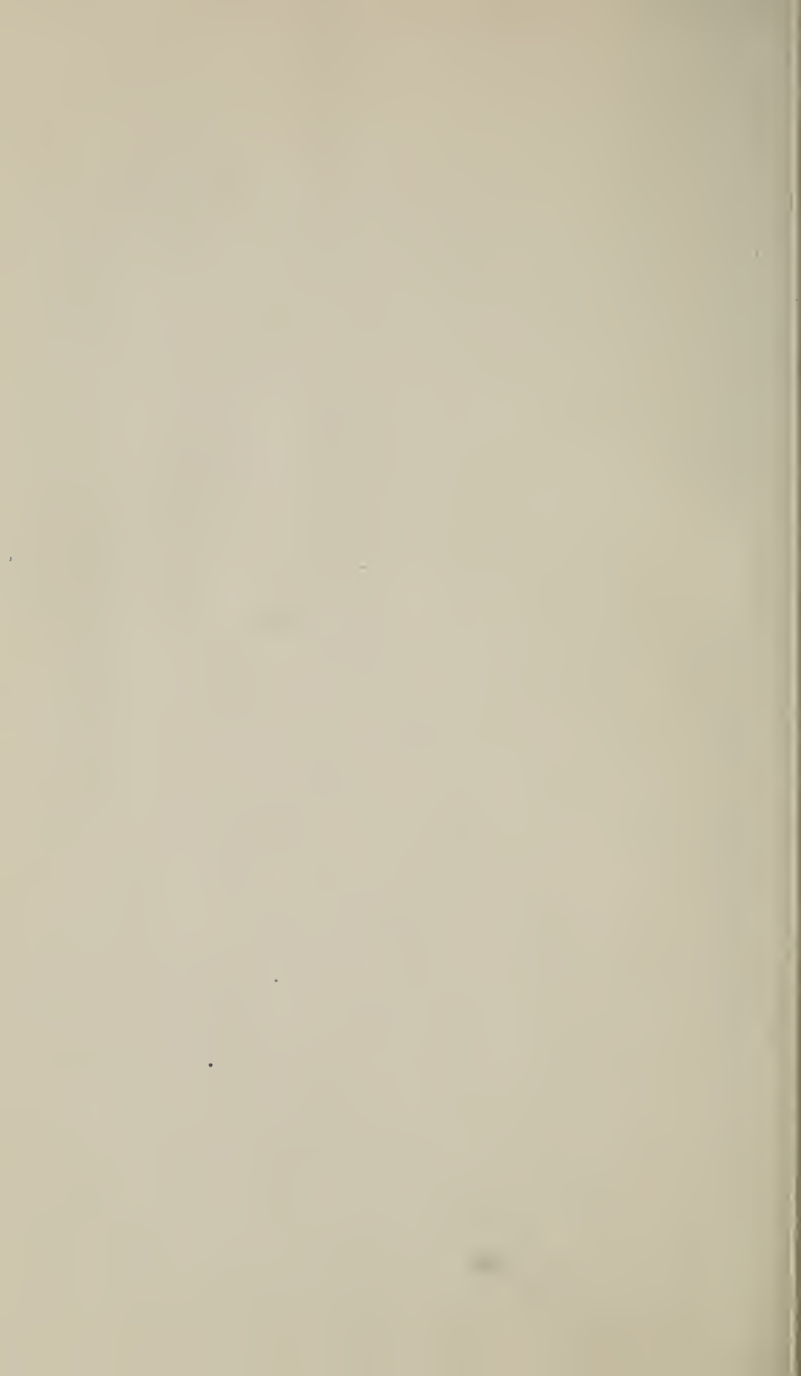
"They say he is obliged to be down there, Eliza," she explains to her sister, Mrs. Grange; "the family are so particular, they wouldn't like Kate to be——"

"There without the protection of her handsome young cousin," Mrs. Grange interrupts. "Well, May, understand yourself, and decide for yourself, for I can't do it for you. Frank is worth being rash for, if you have sensible views; but if you ever let feeling reign, my dear, Frank will positively torture you."

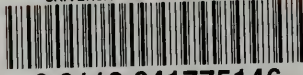
They are talking in this way in a very undecided spirit, when a telegram arrives from Frank—

“My uncle took the fever and died of it in a few hours. Induce my mother to come down.”

END OF VOL. I.



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